Open forum: The politics of gender (research) in a global pandemic

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It goes without saying at this point: we are living in a world plagued by multiple pandemic viruses, both ideological and infectious, with deep implications for feminist livelihoods, research and teaching. Conservative, fascist and nationalist movements, institutions and parties continue their vicious attacks on gender research, on anti-racist, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, and along with certain strands of “feminism” are calling the very meaning of “gender” itself into question. In addition, and perhaps more obviously, over the last nearly two years, the world has been transformed by another man-made pandemic with deeply gendered consequences. Indeed, already in April of 2020, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres noted that “across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex.”

While Secretary General Guterres’ observation about structural inequality is no more news to feminist researchers than the problem that gave rise to #metoo a few years back, we also know that “sex” is hardly a simple matter or virtue. Indeed, just like anti-gender movements target some bodies more than others, it is clear that while we may all run the risk of catching the infamous corona virus, the impact and effects of this pandemic are hardly universal. The North and West remain in focus of news reporting and strategies and global corporations and powerful nations control access to and profits from the vaccine. Europe and its nations continue to report deeply gendered, classed, and racialized inequalities in terms of exposure, illness, precarity and vaccine rates, to name only a few.

The pandemic has affected the personal and professional health and well-being of scholars in diverse ways to be sure, and they depend on personal and structural location, family situation and levels of job (in)security, among other factors. Yet, as we “return to work”, it seems that, on the whole, academics in Europe have largely faced a number of inconveniences as we have had to adjust our teaching and research practices and link our home dwellings to the corporate-owned communication systems that universities now rely on. As European nations move in the direction of “going back” many of us reflecting

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on our experiences over the last eighteen months, and asking ourselves and each other: what have we learned? While the pandemic certainly points to the importance of feminist perspectives and knowledge on matters of gender, equality, justice and power, not to mention climate change, travel patterns, standards of living and medicine, it has also shown the limits of a whole range of research and teaching methods that rely on intimate encounters with other humans, and it has raised many new questions. This Open Forum presents a selection of papers drawn from the journal’s biannual symposium held online in April of 2021, which aimed to take stock of Covid 19’s impact on gender studies and its researchers and activist allies. We hope it can serve both as an archive of differentiated impact and lessons learned and as a prompt for keeping the conversation going as we grapple with discourses about “opening up”, “returning to the pre-pandemic normal” and creating “a new normal”.

The Symposium was an opportunity to interrogate what was or is “normal” in women’s/gender studies. While gender is a core concept for interdisciplinary and intersectional fields variously called women’s/feminist/gender studies, the theoretical and political meaning of the term itself is far from self-evident. Rather, in the past decade, gender has been subject to intense scholarly and activist debate in and across a range of geopolitical locations, including feminist ones. It is clear across a range of scholarship that feminists have been considering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects that working from home has had, especially on heterosexual women who’ve had to face the demands of home-schooling children and domestic work responsibilities, heightened risks of violence and income loss, to name only a few themes. At the same time, the rejuvenated Black Lives Matter movement and growing Black feminist scholarship continue to call attention to police, military, state and environmental violence on Black people and people of colour, and to glaring inequalities in health, economics and education that once again point to the limits of simplistic gender analyses based on binary categories. Queer activists and scholars also point to the limits of the renewed emphasis on family and home for many LGBTQI+ people, young persons in particular. In light of our increasingly complex discussions about justice, power and inequality on differently positioned gendered bodies, and the urgent need for critical research, it is particularly surprising that in many European countries, the concept of gender has come under renewed scrutiny and contestation, including within feminist movements. Gender is currently at the centre not only of a range of attacks from political movements that can be described as staunchly anti-feminist at best and risking the future of a whole field of research at worst, at the same time, it has also conjured up heated internal discussions among scholars, students and activists across Europe. Alas, we are left having to continue to grapple with the core questions of “women’s studies.” Who is it for? What does this intra-feminist debate on gender mean for research, scholarship, education and activism? How do we make sense of what are seemingly intensely affective contestations and their deeply material effects? Does the renewed focus on gender help or hinder continued analysis of, and discussions about, persisting and growing material inequalities related to racism, nationalism, colonialism, ableism, ageism and heterosexism in and across Europe?

In a roundtable entitled ‘(re)thinking gender in the 21st century, Gail Lewis, Julian Honkasalo and Sarah Franklin offered their views on these questions during the
Symposium; questions which we arguably all have to deal with in this era. On the panel, former EJWS editor and Black feminist theorist Gail Lewis pointed to the deeply colonialist and racist roots of all discussions and definitions of sex and gender, and thereby to their obvious limitations as terms under which we can assemble and theorise in universal terms. Sarah Franklin, leading scholar in feminist studies of kinship and reproduction, whose paper is included here, argued that a heightened emphasis on gender binarism has become a kind of proxy or figure that is tied to national politics in a range of ways, including in support of white supremacy and ethno-nationalism. Gender binarism, Franklin argues, now stands in “for ideas of the biological and of naturalness, for ‘normality’ and heteronormativity, moral decency, religious salvation, common sense, scientific truth, national identity and traditional authority” (Franklin, this issue). It is not difficult to see how such a recourse would gain more ground in a time of pandemic uncertainty. Taking a Strathernian approach, Franklin urges feminists to consider gender as a device, including in feminism, and to examine how it often works as a proxy for social order itself.

Franklin also offers a convincing explanation of why a resurgent struggle over gender among feminists functions as a distraction from the serious and hard work of creating truly intersectional feminist analysis and visions. Indeed, what she astutely calls here “the epistemology of the toilet” and a discourse around establishing the truth of gender or womanhood that some factions of feminism are now advocating, (in agreement with some rather strange bedfellows from the conservative right), far too easily recentres a feminist agenda around the concerns of white cisgendered privileged women who apparently are not troubled by the growing threats to democracy, civil liberties and even basic human rights that are at stake in a climate of growing racism, fascism and neo-conservativism, but who often claim to speak on behalf of others; as long as they fit within what counts as true womanhood; being born and raised “female.”

Adding to this discussion, in their piece entitled “Revitalizing feminist politics of solidarity in the age of anti-genderism” philosopher and transgender studies scholar Julian Honkasalo links the contemporary so called “gender critical feminism” and its tendencies to turn transwomen into figures that threaten the safety of women and girls to the broader anti-gender movement. As Honkasalo notes, epistemological debate is certainly not new to academic feminism, but what is new is the tendency to make social media the scene of the argument. This shift must be understood, Honkasalo argues, in relation to increasing surveillance and militarization and to a shrinking public space. Furthermore, they contend, “gender critical” feminism is not so much a question of how we define “sex” as it is an attack on intersectional analysis and activism that limits or blocks the coalition and alliance-building that is necessary in the face of a world shaped by neoliberalism and finance capitalism. Honkasalo suggests that in order for a feminist politics of solidarity to be effective, much more attention needs to be paid to the broader historical forces that shape our understandings of freedom and democracy.

Honkasalo’s intervention into what - to many of us concerned with growing inequalities, racism and right-wing extremism - often seems to be a white-dominated and inflammatory form of feminism that has little to do with the obvious crises brought about by climate change and global pandemics, speaks to the essay by leading anti-gender movement scholars Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk presented during the Symposium
and included in this Open forum. In their contribution, “Anti-gender campaigns as a reactionary response to neoliberalism” the authors build on their recent study on the subject (Graff and Korolczuk, 2021) to make a slightly different point, namely that “there is an eerie similarity between the left critique of neoliberal feminism and anti-gender discourse, which links the struggle for gender equality with the triumph of global capitalism” (Korolczuk & Graff, this issue). The point is not simply that mainstream feminism has failed to address the effects of neoliberalism, but rather that the left has lost its monopoly on a critique thereof; indeed, these days, rightwing movements’ invocations of traditional understandings of gender, the family and sexual divisions of labour is presented as a viable solution. As a quite different form of alliance politics, the anti-gender movement, they contend, relies on “an opportunistic synergy: an ideological, organizational and affective dynamic rooted in anti-elitism and valorization of the common people” (ibid). in countries such as Hungary and Poland, but also in post-social democratic states such as Sweden. The right offers a new form of welfare chauvinism that combines generous social policies for families with a exclusionary rhetorics. Put together, the papers by Franklin, Honkasalo and Graff and Korulczuk raise the question of what happens in an increasingly conservative time when on one hand, certain forms of feminism become increasingly aligned -willingly or not - with right wing chauvinism, and on the other hand, what it means that so much of contemporary debate, both within feminism and more broadly, is caught up in affective investments in conservative ideas about gender at the expense of addressing much more complex issues facing humanity across the world.

Graff and Korulczuk’s paper was one of several presented in the second panel at the symposium, entitled ‘Reflections from Activist/Academic Intersections: Gender, Rights & Justice in the Midst of a Pandemic.’ Chaired by EJWS senior co-editor, madeleine kennedy-macfoy, this panel focused on women’s rights advocacy and/or service provision for women and LGBTQI+ populations during the pandemic in different contexts in Europe. The panel explored implications for academic work on related issues, including access to or lack of sustainable funding, the precarity of rights organisations within national civic space, and solidarity/contestations within/between feminist/women’s rights movements. Among the panelists were queer sociologist Ana Cristina Santos whose paper in this Open Forum shares insights from research on LGBTQI+ issues in Southern Europe generally, and Portugal specifically. Drawing on ongoing work with LGBTQI+ organisations, Santos points to the heightened risks, especially for marginalised youth and the elderly for whom domestic space and family life may not be a place of safety and comfort, but rather of abuse and entrapment. Moving away from a simplistic analysis of gender and sexuality, Santos stresses the importance of understanding discrimination as “intersectional, cumulative and aggravated by vulnerability”, and encourages us to consider the relationship between the pandemic, environmental disasters and attacks on gender and sexual diversity.

After focusing on the broader issues facing academics and activists concerned with various kinds of “gender politics”, the symposium’s second day focused on insights from the effects that the pandemic has had on teaching and doing research. At the onset of the pandemic and with little to no warning or preparation, some 20,000 higher education institutions around the world sent home close to 200 million students,
suspending normal operations including research, lab, and field work, and shifted to online teaching and learning. Early research into how universities handled unplanned expenditures on distance teaching and learning platforms and tools, and on health prevention measures, showed that the Covid-19 crisis has put structural weaknesses in the financing and organisational models of many higher education systems and institutions around the world into sharp relief. In particular, research has now clearly shown the effects of the pandemic on low-income countries and on students from marginalized and underrepresented communities, and again, it is clear that it is in particular ‘low-income students, girls and women, members of minority groups, and students with special needs’ who have faced the greatest challenges.

In a panel planned by EJWS co-editor Dubravka Zarkov and chaired by former EJWS editor Kathy Davis, a range of teachers in gender studies from across Europe shared stories about teaching during the pandemic, providing creative solutions to complex teaching problems and many moving examples of how students and teachers, especially those who move location for education and work, have been affected. At the symposium, as in many local discussions, it was clear that teachers in gender studies have gone out of our way to support both students and colleagues, often with the shift to digital modes of communication bringing tremendous additional work and administration. In this Open Forum, Nina Degele and Libora Oates-Indruchova offer feminist commentary on everyday teaching life during the pandemic. Degele points to the gendered dimensions of digital communication fatigue, including how constantly viewing one’s own image mirrors the male gaze and encourages constant comparison to gender ideals, but also the benefits of an altered sense of hierarchy in digital arenas. Oates-Indruchova on the other hand, notes how for some of the many academics who are used to commuting, various forms of “lock-down” and staying in place have also brought about more engagement in local care networks and with family, as well as a greater sense of digital intimacy as friends and family are keen to be in contact, while at the same time adding more administration, evaluation, and management to academic life. While Degele hopes that the pandemic will lead to better preparation for crisis management, the general sense in the panel was that it is unclear exactly what university administrations will take away from the pandemic and the lessons learned.

The final panel, planned and chaired by EJWS associate editor Andrea Petö, explored a topic close to our hearts, namely the impact of the pandemic on academic publishing, here included in the form of a round table discussion. Within publishing, data from a study on manuscript submissions and peer review activities in all Elsevier journals between May 2018 and May 2020 (involving six million participants) showed that ‘that women submitted proportionally fewer manuscripts than men during the COVID-19 lockdown months…[indicating] that the pandemic has already created cumulative advantages for men’ (Squazzoni et al., 2020: 1). Clearly, it is in the interest of feminist academics and others concerned with journal publishing to track what this might mean for the state of gender (in)equality in academia. There is certainly data that shows the extent to which the disproportionately gendered distribution of care and domestic work (in men’s favour) has intensified as a result of the pandemic. However, there is still much analytical work to do if we are to not only highlight but also undo
and transform the patriarchal structures that bind and harm us all, including academics. We might for instance consider that not all (academic) women live in heterosexual nuclear family arrangements; that in many settings the middle class working from home trend has also led to a growing “outsourcing” of shopping and cooking to various delivery services that exploit the labour of migrants, international students, and undocumented people (all of whom remain vulnerable to the virus in very different ways); and that the pandemic - with its implosion of the private and the public - has revealed very different forms of living arrangements and family obligations among colleagues. These issues, among many others, are frequently obscured from (office and seminar) view.

Participants in the roundtable represented and reflected on different types of journal models, including self-financed and published, project financed, institutional, profit oriented with a national focus and journals with a transnational focus financed by publishing houses. Editors pointed to both personal and professional impact, which itself attests to the uneven effects of the pandemic. Some journals have struggled with direct impact on the health of editorial collectives, others have used the journal to offer new theoretical and empirical insights. The daily work of journal publishing was impacted, though perhaps more slowly than anticipated; review processes were affected by the challenge of finding reviewers, submission rates have slowed down to some extent. At the same time, as the editors of Kohl and lambda Nordica stress, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of the pandemic from the structural injustices already in place on a global scale; economic crises that disproportionately affect the poor and marginalised, not to mention ongoing wars, military interventions and occupations that continue to shape the production and circulation of feminist scholarship. The insights gained from the roundtable point to the importance of ongoing conversation between journals in our field that can render visible, track and analyse the effects of different editorial models, as well as models of funding and access that different journals have.

All in all, this Open Forum offers a glimpse into the important insights shared at the journal’s latest biannual symposium. To my mind, they point to the tremendous intellectual and emotional labour that feminist teachers, scholars and activists have poured into managing and making sense of the pandemic, and to the importance of learning from this quite extraordinary time. They are also acute reminders that the world into which the corona virus arrived was far from an ideal one; that there is no “normal” to go back to. As scholars, we must continue to make sense of not only the factors that gave rise to the pandemic, including a climate crisis brought about by the legacies of extractive colonialism, and made worse by economic elites and authoritarian governments with little care for the planet or the people who inhabit it. We must continue to ask what it means that debates about our core concepts, such as “gender”, and the theories introduced largely by scholars who insist that our field must do much more than attend to “women and girls” as a unified group or single female “category”, are precisely those that are now being under attack. We must also continue to consider the conditions that make possible and shape so many of our debates and so much of our teaching (the digital arena), and pay attention to how the new forms of surveillance brought about by monitoring the pandemic will shape and affect our freedom to assemble, write, act and speak up against continued injustice.
Notes
1. https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406
2. The symposium was planned by madeleine kennedy-macfoy and Ulrika Dahl and organized on Zoom through the Department of Gender Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The organisers would like to thank managing editor Hazel Johnstone for helping with logistics, Lucia Pedrioli and Rebecka White for excellent technical support with building, distributing and carrying out the programme and Ana Sevillano, Béa Manigat, Meryld Koui, Yaili Meneses and Loreto Rodriguez Uントria for providing simultaneous translation of the symposium into French and Spanish. We also thank all the contributing speakers, the roughly 50 academics, students, and activists from all over Europe and beyond who participated, and last, but certainly not least, the board of associate editors of European Journal of Women’s Studies and former senior editor Kathy Davis for all their contributions and hard work in making this event happen.
3. https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/covid-lessons-for-global-higher-education.pdf
4. ibid

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Graff A and Korolczuk E (2021) Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment. New York & London: Routledge.
Squazzoni F, et al. (2020) ‘Only second-class tickets for women in the COVID-19 race. A study on manuscript submissions and reviews in 2329 elsevier Journals’ (October 16, 2020). SSRN. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3712813.

Gender as a proxy: Diagnosing and resisting carceral genderisms

Sarah Franklin

In this roundtable for the biennial European Journal of Women’s Studies conference on ‘Rethinking Gender’, organised by Ulrika Dahl and madeleine kennedy-macfoy, we’ve been asked to reflect on ‘how gendered ideologies are understood’, and to comment on some of the dilemmas regarding these understandings in the current context. This is a timely invitation. The situation of gender studies in Europe and across the globe has been significantly complicated by two important trends: the emergence of right-wing anti-‘gender ideology’ and anti-‘genderism’ agendas, and the rise of anti-trans discourse not only from feminists, but in the name of feminism, especially (but not exclusively) in the UK. This short commentary tries to draw some connections between these two overlapping contemporary trends through which gender, ‘genderism’ and gender binarism have come to play distinctive ideological roles in political debate.