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Published online: 28 Sep 2022.

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# Centring intersecting gender inequalities of COVID-19 on womxn

editorial

Benita Moolman, Catherine Ndinda 🔴 and Angeline Stephens

Emerging research and media reports suggest that COVID-19 has worsened gender inequality within the social, economic and political domains at community, national and international levels. Examples of such gendered disparities may be seen in the increase in child marriages, unwanted and unplanned teenage pregnancies, increasing homelessness of poor womxn, migrants and transwomen, evictions due to lack of rent and the heightened killing of LGBTIQ+ persons. This means that progress towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – particularly SDG5 which seeks to achieve gender equality and to empower all womxn and girls – that our governments have been reporting on in the past few years, has been greatly affected. Government and institutional responses seem to be paralysed by what Julia Smith (2019) refers to as the 'tyranny of the urgent', characterised by priorisation of medical and economic imperatives over other structural dynamics of the pandemic. In particular, the emerging research and debates have been largely devoid of an intersectional gendered or feminist analysis, leaving the gendered impacts of the pandemic invisible and unaddressed.

As a Save the Children (2020) report warns, unless we understand and address the violence that shapes and silences intersectional, gendered experiences of COVID-19 and the particular impact on girls and womxn, a whole generation faces a bleak future. Although various state and non-state actors have attempted to outline their COVID-19 interventions, gaps abound with regard to how the interventions influenced the way womxn, transgender persons, LGBTIQ+ persons, and girls navigated their lives through the epidemic. Feminist theoretical and conceptual frameworks, derived from the critical engagement and interrogation of systems that entrench exclusion and marginalisation of the powerless masses, provide the tools to investigate systems and interventions during global disasters such as COVID-19. Intersectionality, a theoretical framework developed to interrogate racialised gender inequalities, has become a useful lens for deconstructing inequalities within groups (Ndinda et al. 2021). In the context of COVID-19, the critical questions remain: Whose voices have been amplified or silenced due to the COVID-19 pandemic? Who has been expected to 'carry on' and expand the responsibility of unpaid care work? Who is safe at home? It is these and other gender-related questions and concerns that this special edition seeks to engage with.

This special edition seeks to engage with a range of questions: How might we think (differently and critically) about the unique contextual realities facing the girl child and womxn in the Southern African context in the time of COVID-19, such that we advance gender transformation and womxn's freedom? What forms of research, activism and practice are needed, possible or desirable if we are to address the intersectional, gendered impacts of the pandemic and other emergencies in our region? What would an intentional gendered response to the issues look like?

This issue addresses the experiences of womxn and girls through an intersectional lens that explores the relationships between gender and land, and in particular the idea of home and placelessness,

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womxn's health and informal employment practices, women and caregiving and the recognition or lack thereof, as well as black womxn's experiences of online learning and life in higher education institutions. As this special issue goes to publication, much of the world has began to return to some form of pre-pandemic living. The disparate effects of the pandemic on gender that have been foregrounded in the contributions in this issue and the questions that they raise become even more salient as we navigate a post-pandemic life.

Place and placelessness is a central theme in this edition. Conventional meanings of place are always geographical, but if we consider place as socially, economically, culturally and politically produced and reproduced it is evident that womxn remain place-less. Evictions and housing precarity are the obvious manifestations of placelessness, but 'working from home' and the burden of care work, as discussed by Adebayo, Ndinda and Ndhlovu in this issue, demonstrate that even the place demarcated for womxn (by patriarchies) as the home, during the COVID-19 pandemic has become a place where womxn's existence is tightly squeezed in between domestic, family responsibilities and work. In this issue Ndhlovu alerts us how home as collective and intergenerational ownership in informal settlements, *ekasi* and the neoliberal idea of home as conflated with house and individual property is contested.

Evictions and the examples used by Ndhlovu, such as the Anti-Land Invasion Unit in the City of Cape Town, demonstrate the contradictions of land ownership in democratic South Africa. This author reflects on the purpose and use of state machinery to 'enforce' evictions, yet state machinery is required to comply with the Constitution. Contradictions arise through historical notions of displacement, dispossession and dehumanisation that were enforced during apartheid but now continue to pervade the lives of 'poor' black womxn. Womxn's housing is reduced to the protection of property and private land rather than a focus on the inclusion, shelter and safety of womxn. What does it mean to live a life of precarity? Secure living is an unachievable dream and the goal of inclusion becomes meaningless. Inclusion becomes translated as access for a few –

large-scale inclusion of womxn, black and poor is highly unlikely. We urgently need new visions that centre womxn rather than positioning womxn as marginal and therefore always in need of inclusion.

Womxn as informal traders highlight the multiple roles that womxn fulfill within both the paid and unpaid economy. Here too womxn are positioned as marginal to the economy, and the precarious position that womxn occupy between the home and the informal economy leaves them with limited protections. Sinyolo, Jacobs, Nyamwanza and Maila advocate for the recognition and visibility of womxn informal traders within the gendered agri-food system. Hidden assumptions that are embedded within the agri-food system mean that womxn are invisible and their work and needs are unrecognised. Continuous advocacy for the inclusion of womxn as informal traders is insufficient; it also signals that gendered discourses that promote inclusion as a goal are limited. Neoliberal capitalist ideologies have accommodated gendered concerns; accommodation is very different to inclusion. The realisation that the agri-food system has to place womxn informal traders at the centre is also a realisation of the failure of gendered inclusion as a pathway to gender equality and womxn's freedom.

Gendered attitudes and consumption of fruit and vegetables is shaped through gendered and cultural attitudes and behaviours. Mngomezulu, Ndinda, Mazamane, Sinyolo and Adebayo highlight the impact of retailers and the capitalist market economy on what is produced, sold and consumed. The consumption of healthy fruit and vegetables is distorted by the idea of the 'modern' and the urban in relationship and comparison to the rural and the traditional. The modern is received as healthy and of value, and hence commercial retailers rarely stock indigenous vegetables due to procurement practices embedded in apartheid and the belief that they are less likely to be consumed, and are less valued. Gender and culture intersect and low-income black womxn remain marginal to public and capitalist discourse on the consumption of healthy fruit and vegetables. The authors argue that decolonising the food system is important in demarginalising indigenous vegetables and foods and

increasing consumption by the general population.

Foli advocates for an appreciation of the intersection of culture and race for black, African, young female students as they navigate the multiple challenges that came with online learning during the pandemic. She highlights the invisibility of the female black African experience as both student and academic. Once again, home became the site of multiple roles during online learning, hence the blurring of boundaries between the private and the public. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the artificial boundaries between the public and the private; the invented fiction that continues to be produced by patriarchies can just as easily be dissolved – if and when it benefits patriarchies. As much as the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated intersectional gendered inequalities, it has also exposed the false binary between the public and private divide.

Care work has always existed outside policies, and it was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic has surfaced work (for womxn) as continuous between the private and the public. Munodawafa and Zengeni demonstrate that the private versus public is a notion that is invented, proposed and institutionalised by patriarchies. During the pandemic home was not sacred, but rather boundaries between work and home were fluid and home became a place of work and vice versa. Care work is complicated through layers of gender and class, and middle-class womxn often employ low-income womxn to care for children and/or the elderly. Feminist solidarities have to examine the layers of reproduction of class and age hierarchies in the context of care and domestic work.

As described earlier, home is contested and causes us to question who belongs in South Africa (as home). Venganai and Benhura question the notion of home, belonging and citizenship as they examine vaccine policies (and access) across several Southern African countries. They conclude that vaccine policies are vague in relation to the inclusion of migrants and refugees, whether documented or undocumented. The recognition of the need for access to vaccines for migrants and refugees requires that the binary between who is considered legal or illegal in the country be dissolved. If there is a recognition of sociopolitical differences such as gender, sex, race, geography, nation, class, ability, etc. – then disaggregated data is indispensable. The basic assumption of all policies must be that South Africa includes citizens and non-citizens who require the protections of the Constitution.

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