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The Future May Be Female, But the Pandemic Is Patriarchal

Feminism in the time of Coronavirus

by
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25 Comments



Thousands of protesters take the streets during the International Women's Day demonstration on 8 March, 2020 in Madrid, Spain (Photo: Sergio Belena / VIEWpress).

Before I found myself “sheltering in place,” this article was to be about women’s actions around the world to mark March 8th, International Women’s Day. From [Pakistan](#) to [Chile](#), women in their millions filled the streets, demanding that we be able to control our bodies and our lives. Women came out in [Iraq and Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Peru, the Philippines and Malaysia](#). In some places, they risked beatings by masked men. In others, they demanded an end to [femicide](#)—the millennia-old reality that women in this world are murdered daily simply because they are women.

In 1975 the Future Was Female

This year’s celebrations were especially militant. It’s been 45 years since the United Nations declared 1975 the International Women’s Year and sponsored its first international conference on women in Mexico City. Similar conferences followed at five-year intervals, culminating in a [1995 Beijing conference](#), producing a platform that has in many ways guided international feminism ever since.

Beijing was a quarter of a century ago, but this year, women around the world seemed to have had enough. On March 9th, Mexican women staged a 24-hour strike, *un día sin nosotras* (a day without us women), to demonstrate just how much the world depends on the labor -- paid and unpaid -- of... yes, women. That womanless day was, by all accounts, a success. The *Wall Street Journal* [observed](#)—perhaps with a touch of astonishment—that “Mexico grinds to a halt. Hundreds of thousands of women paralyzed Mexico in an unprecedented nationwide strike to protest a rising wave of violence against women, a major victory for their cause.”

In addition to crowding the streets and emptying factories and offices, some women also broke store windows and fought with the police. Violence? From women? What could have driven them to such a point?

Perhaps it was the murder of Ingrid Escamilla, 25, a Mexico City resident, who, [according](#) to the *New York Times*, “was stabbed, skinned and disemboweled” this February. Maybe it was that the shooting of the artist and activist Isabel Cabanillas de la Torre in Ciudad Juarez, a barely noted reminder to an uninterested world that women have been disappearing for decades along the U.S.-Mexico border. Or maybe it was just the fact that official figures for 2019 revealed more than 1,000 femicides in Mexico, a 10% increase from the previous year, while many more such murders go unrecorded.

Is the Pandemic Patriarchal?

If it weren't for the pandemic, maybe the *Wall Street Journal* would have been right. Maybe the Day Without Women would have been only the first of many major victories. Maybe the [international feminist anthem](#), “*El violador eres tú*” (You [the patriarchy, the police, the president] are the rapist), would have gone on [inspiring flash-mobs of dancing](#), chanting women everywhere. Perhaps the world's attention might not have been so quickly diverted from the spectacle of women's uprisings globally. Now, however, in the United States and around the world, it's all-pandemic-all-the-time, and with reason. The coronavirus has done what A Day Without Women could not: it's brought the world's economy to a shuddering halt. It's [infected](#) hundreds of thousands of people and killed tens of thousands. And it continues to spread like a global wildfire.

Like every major event and institution, the pandemic affects women and men differently. Although men who fall sick seem more likely than women [to die](#), in other respects, the pandemic and its predictable aftermath are going to be harder on women. How can that be? The writer Helen Lewis [provides some answers](#) in the *Atlantic*.

First of all, the virus, combined with mass quarantine measures, ensures that more people will need to be cared for. This includes older people who are especially at risk of dying and children who are no longer in school or childcare. In developed countries like the United States, people fortunate enough to be able to keep their jobs by working from home are discovering that the presence of bored children does not make this any easier.

Indeed, last night, my little household was treated to a song-and-dance performance by two little girls who live a couple of houses down the street. Their parents had spent the day helping them plan it and then invited us to watch from our backyard. What they'll do tomorrow, a workday, I have no idea. A friend without children has offered to provide daily

15-minute Zoom lessons on anything she can Google, as a form of respite for her friends who are mothers.

As recently as a week ago, it looked as if shuttered schools might open again before the academic year ends, allowing one *New York Times* commentator to [write](#) an article headlined “I Refuse to Run a Coronavirus Home School.” An associate professor of educational leadership, the author says she’s letting her two children watch TV and eat cookies, knowing that no amount of quick-study is going to turn her into an elementary school teacher. I applaud her stance, but also suspect that the children of professionals will probably be better placed than those of low-wage workers to resume the life-and-death struggle for survival in the competitive jungle that is kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade education in this country.

In locked-down heterosexual households, Helen Lewis writes, the major responsibility for childcare will fall on women. She’s exasperated with pundits who point out that people like Isaac Newton and Shakespeare did their best work during a seventeenth-century plague in England. “Neither of them,” she points out, “had child-care responsibilities.” Try writing *King Lear* while your own little [Cordelias, Regans, and Gonerils](#) are pulling at your shirt and complaining loudly that they’re *boored*.

In places like the United Kingdom and the United States, where the majority of mothers have jobs, women will experience new pressures to give up their paid employment. In most two-earner heterosexual households with children, historic pay inequalities mean that a woman’s job usually pays less. So if someone has to devote the day to full-time childcare, it will make economic sense that it’s her. In the U.S., 11% of women are already [involuntarily working only part-time](#), many in jobs with irregular schedules. Even women who have chosen to balance their household work with part-time employment may find themselves under pressure to relinquish those jobs.

As Lewis says, this all makes “perfect economic sense”:

“At an individual level, the choices of many couples over the next few months will make perfect economic sense. What do pandemic patients need? Looking after. What do self-isolating older people need? Looking after. What do children kept home from school need? Looking after. All this looking after -- this unpaid caring labor -- will fall more heavily on women, because of the existing structure of the workforce.”

Furthermore, as women who choose to leave the workforce for a few years to care for very young children know, it’s almost impossible to return to paid work at a position of similar pay and status as the one you gave up. And enforced withdrawal won’t make that any easier.

Social Reproduction? What’s That? And Why Does It Matter?

This semester I’m teaching a capstone course for urban studies majors at my college, the University of San Francisco. We’ve been focusing our attention on something that shapes all our lives: work—what it is, who has it and doesn’t, who’s paid for it and isn’t, and myriad other questions about the activity that occupies so much of our time on this planet. We’ve borrowed a useful concept from Marxist feminists: “social reproduction.” It refers to all the work, paid and unpaid, that someone has to do just so that workers can even show up at their jobs and perform the tasks that earn them a paycheck, while making a profit for their employers.

It's called *reproduction*, because it reproduces workers, both in the biological sense and in terms of the daily effort to make them whole enough to do it all over again tomorrow. It's *social* reproduction, because no one can do it alone and different societies find different ways of doing it.

What's included in social reproduction? There are the obvious things any worker needs: food, clothing, sleep (and a safe place to doze off), not to speak of a certain level of hygiene. But there's more. Recreation is part of it, because it "recreates" a person capable of working effectively. Education, healthcare, childcare, cooking, cleaning, procuring or making food and clothing -- all of these are crucial to sustaining workers and their work. If you'd like to know more about it, Tithi Bhattacharya's *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* is a good place to start.

What does any of this have to do with our pandemic moment? How social reproduction is organized in the United States leaves some people more vulnerable than others in a time of economic crisis. To take one example, over many decades, restaurants have assumed and collectivized (for profit) significant parts of the work of food preparation, service, and clean up, acts once largely performed in individual homes. For working women, the availability of cheap takeout has, in some cases, replaced the need to plan, shop for, and prepare meals seven days a week. Food service is a stratified sector, ranging from high-end to fast-food establishments, but it includes many low-wage workers who have now lost their jobs, while those still working at places providing takeout or drive-through meals are risking their health so that others can eat.

One way professional class two-earner couples in the United States have dealt with the tasks of social reproduction is to outsource significant parts of their work to poorer women. Fighting over who does the vacuuming and laundry at home? Don't make the woman do it all. Hire a different woman to do it for you. Want to have children and a career? Hire a nanny.

Of course, odds are that your house cleaner and nanny will still have to do their own social reproduction work when they get home. And now that their children aren't going to school, somehow they'll have to take care of them as well. In many cases, this will be possible, however, because their work is not considered an "essential service" under the shelter-in-place orders of some states. So they will lose their incomes.

At least here in California, many of the women who do these jobs are undocumented immigrants. When the Trump administration and Congress manage to pass a [relief bill](#), they, like many undocumented restaurant workers, won't be receiving any desperately needed funds to help them pay rent or buy food. Immigrant-rights organizations are [stepping in](#) to try to make up some of the shortfall, but what they're capable of is likely to prove just a few drops in a very large bucket. Fortunately, immigrant workers are among the most resourceful people in this country or they wouldn't have made it this far.

There's one more kind of social reproduction work performed mostly by women, and, by its nature, the very opposite of "social distancing": sex work. You can be sure that no bailout bill will include some of the nation's poorest women, those who work as prostitutes.

Women at Home and at Risk

It's a painful coincidence that women are being confined to their homes just as an international movement against femicide is taking off. One effect of shelter-in-place is to make it much harder for women to find shelter from domestic violence. Are you safer outside risking coronavirus or inside with a bored, angry male partner? I write this in full knowledge that one economic sector that has not suffered from the pandemic is [the gun business](#). Ammo.com, for example, which sells ammunition online in all but four states, [has experienced](#) more than a three-fold increase in revenue over the last month. Maybe all that ammo is being bought to fight off zombies (or the [immigrant invasion](#) the president keeps reminding us about), but [research shows](#) that gun ownership has a lot to do with whether or not domestic violence turns into murder.

Each week, *Washington Post* advice columnist Carolyn Hax hosts a chat line offering suggestions for help of various sorts. For the last two weeks, her readers (myself included) have been horrified by [messages from one participant](#) stuck in quarantine in a small apartment with a dangerous partner who has just bought a gun. Standard advice to women in her position is not just to run, but to make an exit plan, quietly gather the supplies and money you'll need and secure a place to go. Mandatory shelter-in-place orders, however necessary to flattening the curve of this pandemic, may well indirectly cause an increase in domestic femicides.

As if women weren't already disproportionately affected by the coronavirus epidemic, Senate Republicans have been trying to sneak a little extra misogyny into their version of a relief bill. In the same month that Pakistani women risked their lives in demonstrations [under the slogan](#) "*Mera jism, meri marzi*" ("My body, my choice"), Republicans want to use the pandemic in another attempt to -- that's right -- shut down Planned Parenthood clinics.

The *Washington Post*'s Greg Sargent recently [revealed](#) that the \$350 billion being proposed to shore up small businesses that don't lay off workers would exclude nonprofits that receive funds from Medicaid. Planned Parenthood, which provides healthcare for millions of uninsured and underinsured women, is exactly that kind of nonprofit. Democratic congressional aides who alerted Sargent to this suggest that Planned Parenthood wouldn't be the only organization affected. They also believe that

"...this language would exclude from eligibility for this financial assistance a big range of *other* nonprofits that get Medicaid funding, such as home and community-based disability providers; community-based nursing homes, mental health providers, and health centers; group homes for the disabled; and even rape crisis centers."

Meanwhile, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas are trying to use the coronavirus as an excuse to prevent women's access to abortion. On the grounds that such procedures are not medically necessary, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has [ordered](#) abortion providers to stop terminating pregnancies. Earlier, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost sent letters to abortion providers in that state forbidding all "nonessential" surgical abortions.

A Return to Normalcy?

When Warren Harding (who oversaw [a notoriously corrupt](#) administration) ran for president in 1920, his campaign slogan was "a return to normalcy"—the way things were, that is, before World War I. What he meant was a return to economic dynamism. As we know, the "Roaring Twenties" provided it in spades—until that little crash known as the Great

Depression. Today, like Harding, another corrupt president is promising a prompt return to normalcy. He's already chafing at the 15-day period of social distancing he announced in mid-March. At his March 23rd press conference, he hinted that the United States would be "open for business" sooner rather than later. The next day, he [suggested](#) that the country reopen for business on Easter (a "very special day for me"), saying he wants to see "packed churches all over our country." He can't wait until everything, including our deeply unequal healthcare and economic systems, gets back to normal—the way they were before the spread of the coronavirus; until, that is, we can go back to being unprepared for the next, inevitable crisis.

Unlike the president, I hope we don't go back to normal. I hope the people of Venice come to appreciate their [sparkling canals](#) and their returning dolphins. I hope that the rest of us become attached to [less polluted air and lower carbon emissions](#). I hope that we learn to value the lives of women.

I hope, instead of returning to normalcy, we recognize that our survival as a species depends on changing almost everything, including how we produce what we need and how we reproduce ourselves as fully human beings. I hope that, when we have survived this pandemic, the world's peoples take what we have learned about collective global action during this crisis and apply it to that other predictable crisis, the one that threatens all human life on a [distinctly warming planet](#).



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