

**GENDER POLITICS AND THE TRAJECTORY OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN
THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

BY

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Abstract

The Covid-19 has intensified gender division and injustices rooted in a system of domination, marginalization and subordination of women. In this paper, I argue that the contradictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the preexisting gender inequalities in the socio-political context. The central thesis of this paper is that a gender equitable politics is incompatible with the dynamics of Covid-19. The paper explores the gendered effects of Covid-19 and submits that these call for critical thinking regarding the hitherto dichotomy between the private and public sphere. The paper explores some uncomfortable revelations such as increase in gender violence. To argue out one's thesis, this paper brings interconnected issues such as political participation, socio-economic ability and inclusiveness to bear. The method of this paper is expository and critical.

Key words: Gender politics, socio-political contexts, Coronavirus, political power, political participation, inclusiveness.

Introduction

Since February 2020, there has been consternation in the world, a world that appeared hitherto tranquil and confident at its medical science breakthroughs, scientific inventions and achievements. This consternation is the outcome of a tiny virus, called Coronavirus or COVID-19. From aircraft pilots and bus drivers to prime ministers and presidents, people from all walks of life have either fallen sick or died as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. One is, therefore, not surprised at the remark that the virus does not discriminate. However, COVID-19 has profoundly different outcomes for men and women not just in terms of their health but also in economic and political terms.

Alluding to this fact in his opening remarks at the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres said that "COVID-19 is a crisis with a woman's face," meaning that in terms of its effects and harm, women bear the brunt of the infection. Following this gendered perspective, the UN chief scribe made the point that the fall out in the months that followed revealed how deeply gender inequality remains embedded in the world's political, social and economic systems. (www.un.org/press/en/2021/wom22)

Buttressing the above point, the World Economic Forum's 2021 Global Gender Gap Report states that:

more than 135 years will be needed for countries to close the gender gap. Across the four sectors measured-political empowerment, economic participation, education and health-the greatest disparities are seen among political empowerment, a measure of gender parity within politics which takes into account political representation from the parliamentary level to heads of state, a gap that will take 10 years to close.

(Kaia Hubbard 2021, www.usnews.com/news/best-country).

Clearly, the gap is not in terms of voting but has to do with women who enter the political arena and participate in 'gladiatorial activities' such as standing and holding political and party offices. The gap according to the report will take 10 years to fill.

The aim of this paper is to examine the trajectory of gender inequality with a view to showing that such has been exacerbated with the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. To realize its objective, this paper is divided into three sections; Section one gives one insight into the dynamics of gender, as well as the essential ingredients gender politics. Section two brings gender politics to bear on the contradictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the lessons to be learned and the opportunities to be tapped from such. This also embodies the conclusion.

What is Gender?

"As between male and female, the former is by nature superior and ruler, the latter inferior and subject. And this must hold good of mankind in general" (Aristotle 68) "The male are more suited to rule than the female, unless conditions are quite contrary to nature" (Aristotle 92)

Aristotle's ideology as the above quotes clearly show justifies not only women's subordination and marginalization but also the exclusion of women from citizenship and participation in the political life of the society.

It is fitting to indicate from the start that gender includes both men and women. But there is this tendency to think that it is all about women and this is for good reason. Issues about women subordination, marginalization, oppression, suppression and women empowerment appear to dominate the discussion when issues of gender are raised. This is not surprising since the gender relations over the years have been characterized by inequality. An appraisal of this inequality presents one with a regimen of hindrances, barriers, obstacles and hurdles, which beset the female sex. Women suffer disproportionately from denials and deprivation of economic, educational and political opportunities.

The concern with gender dynamics borders on a wide range of issues: what role men and women are expected to play in various societies, how men and women relate in both private and public spheres, perception of self, legal status, socio-economic space, poverty, women in education and development, human rights violations, political and socioeconomic rights, justice and equality, respect for human dignity, empowerment and indeed, everything that is life enhancing. This paper delimits one's concern to gender politics as this pertains to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gender is the set of socially constructed behavioural and psychological characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity. The term has been used for social construction of what it means to be a woman, or man as distinct from biological sex of an individual. Masculinity has to do with the appropriate gender behavior, traits and roles for men. In contrast, femininity is used to refer to the ideology that dictates appropriate gender behavior for women. Such portraits of manhood and womanhood are found in several literary and philosophical productions and differ according to social contexts.

Simone de Beauvoir's (1955) view that one is not born woman but one becomes one aptly captures the picture. In her book, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir raises the question of what it means to be a woman. According to her, the category of womanhood is imposed by civilization and the fundamental social meaning is "other", which is mysterious. She makes the point that the concept of femininity is socially and historically determined. From the existentialist standpoint which affirms that "existence precedes essence", De Beauvoir urges the view that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one".

The implication of the above is that the so-called characteristic attitudes of men and women are acquired, they are cultural; the results of social conditioning. Thus, masculinity and femininity are the effects of historical processes and vary from culture to culture. What is called femininity is really an existential condition in a given culture. It is definitely not grounded either in biology or in a mysterious feminine essence. De Beauvoir maintains that there are no fixed essences, no fixed human nature.

Unlike sex which is ascribed, gender then, is an achieved status because it is learned. According to Ivone Gebara (1), "gender is a socially learned concept, manifested, institutionalized and transmitted from generation to generation". This requires of individuals to perform their roles, as men and women, in conformity with what their culture expects of them. It affects not only the males and females but also the relationships, which they enter into. Culturally, socially, economically and politically, such relationships have been characterized by inequality.

In recognition of the abuses and violations that have characterized gender relations in both private and public spheres historically, several international conventions and declarations exist to protect gender rights and to advocate for the equal treatment of men and women. These include the United Nations Charter, which affirms the Fundamental Human Rights of all

humans irrespective of their gender; and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a document ratified by United Nations member states in 1948, which also provides for the protection of a wide range of rights for people around the world. The UDHR clearly provides for the equality of all human beings and respect for their rights and freedoms without any form of discrimination based on sex. Several other Instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all seek to promote gender rights. On the African continent, the Maputo Protocol, the African Union's Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, also affirms women's comprehensive rights, including political, social and economic rights. None the less, gender inequality is ubiquitous while violations and abuses are the daily experience of many women worldwide. Gender inequality manifests in the exclusion of women from participation in decision making, lack of access to productive resources, violence against women, and violation of women's rights, which are human rights.

Gender Politics

In conceptualizing politics, one adopts Hannah Arendt's definition of politics as collective action. However, her notion of politics is intimately connected with her conception of power. She defines power as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert", power "springs up between men when they act and vanishes the moment they disperse". Arendt argues that the public-political life rests on the discussion between the ruled and the ruler, as a pre-political condition but the concept of rule originally had no role in politics. The division between ruling and being ruled was first experienced in private domain on the basis of being subject to necessity.

In western tradition, politics is conceived in terms of dominance. For Arendt, politics is an end in itself. It is a realm of plurality and artificial equality where individuals can show themselves and distinguish one from another, through their speech and actions. It requires the company of other 'actors' and 'spectators,' with whom we act together, and through whom we are recognized as subjects.

The pre-political area refers to the domestic private realm of life which is the family and is tied to activities dedicated to satisfying basic needs. It is a place where asymmetrical relations of violence can take place. What comes to mind here is domestic violence and perhaps the denial of women, access to property rights.

Arendt gives priority to the inter-subjective public space as a sphere of mutual recognition in which words can be listened and actions can be shared, and where humans can appear to others in terms of their uniqueness. For Arendt, the political sphere emerges when men and women act together (Arendt 108). Notably, this interaction between men and women involves decision making, enacting laws, and reasoning about social policy objectives. It is in this context of

acting together that one can interrogate the dynamic of gender politics. Indeed, the experience has been that of gender gaps and inequality.

Gender politics requires an analysis of the experiences of women and men as this pertains to exercise of power, participation in decision-making and governance. It tries to identify concrete strategies and mechanisms to make parliaments/political/public space gender sensitive. (Childs Sarah 84-85).

Politics is about power, as well as decision making and world over, spaces where this power is dispensed equally between the two genders are in short supply. Though a great majority of women worldwide currently enjoy suffragette rights, it took a lot of struggle for women to be where they are today in this regard. New Zealand was the first to enfranchise women in 1893. This was followed by Norway in 1913; Brazil in 1932; Japan in 1945; Morocco in 1959, Switzerland in 1971, the United States of America in 1920 and Saudi Arabia in 2015. However, after several years of women's suffrage, there has been gender disparity in citizen political participation.

Burns, Schlozman and Verba (7-8) attribute gender disparity in political participation to the private institutions in which we nurture and are nurtured while Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (4) refer to the combination of other factors that range from many demands on women's time and energy (raising children and having full time employment), disparity in socioeconomic resources, which disadvantage women with respect to education, income and occupational status, processes of discrimination that operate directly to keep women out of politics as well as cultural factors.

It is in connection with the above reality that Kittilson and Bayer (11) have said that inside democracies, there exists a variety of marginalized groups and that one of the largest and most visible of these groups has been women. This fact translates to women not being represented in politics at the same level as men, and even when they are represented, they are not selected as leaders within political parties and government as their male counterparts. In what follows, an attempt is made to highlight how this plays out in the context of COVID-19.

Gender Politics and COVID-19

In every political administration based on equality there is room for all and sundry to participate fully in taking decisions. What this means is that everybody is carried along in the deliberations on matters of common interest. Thus, when one speaks of gender politics and how this plays out in the context of COVID – 19, one specifically tries to examine how the pre-existing gender inequality and gap in politics bears on the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, how has COVID-19 ultimately empowered or disempowered men and women in particular in politics. Following this, one looks at gender as the measure of the democratic character of the political context or the way affairs have been run during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the position of this paper that COVID-19 further disempowers women and reinforces the already

pre-existing gender inequality in politics. The paper employs three political paradigms to prove its thesis. These are participation, socio-economic ability and inclusion in decision making.

Participation

Political equality is measured in terms of citizens' participation in their government, the extent to which decisions and policies reflect the popular will. It manifests concretely in the conferment on all adult citizens the right to vote, the right to stand as a candidate for election. But the enjoyment of political equality may not make real sense in the atmosphere of socioeconomic disabilities. Hence, the need for economic equality, which consists in the provision of adequate wages and so on. These two aspects come to play when one talks about COVID-19. There is ample evidence to show that in many countries across the world, the socio-political context is unrepresentative in gender terms. Women are marginalized and denied of leadership positions as the political parties are male dominated. Notably, a greater majority of women do participate in voting than before, but the right to vote is not synonymous with political equality though a part of it.

It was in this connection that the former UN Secretary General, Ban KI-moon has observed that a situation where fewer than 10 per cent of countries have female heads of state or government and only 33 countries have reached 30 per cent or greater representation of women in positions of political leadership, which can be seen in all parts of the world and in both developing and developed contexts, indicates more than just a lack of commitment to gender equality- it also signals a lack of commitment to democracy (Toammasoli Massim ed.15).

Bringing the above scenario to bear on COVID-19, Vallejo & Walsh (2019), Godin (2020), True (2020), have said that despite increases in public support by the international community and individual governments for the increased participation of women in political life, women politicians around the world have continued to face barriers, hostility and violent attacks against their political and electoral participation during the pandemic

Violence against women is one of such barriers. In the private sphere, cases of domestic violence have been on the rise. This situation does impact directly on women's ability to participate equally, freely and safely in political life. Beyond the private sphere, violence against women during election periods engendered not only physical harm towards women candidates, voters, election officials and others, it also discourages women from running for office or from casting a ballot at all (Ballington 2017, n.p).

The United Nations defines what violence against women means in political terms. According to the world Body:

Violence against women in political life is any act of or threat of gender-based violence, resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women, that

prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights, whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to freely campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression. Such violence can be perpetrated by a family member, community member, community and or by the state (United Nations 1966)

Following the above, Gabrielle Bardall et.al raise the question, “when politically active women face barriers to their political participation, is it violence? If political violence encompasses a larger set of harms in a wider set of places, how is such violence gendered? They argue that political violence can be gendered in multiple but distinct ways and that gendered motives appear when perpetrators use violence to preserve hegemonic men’s control of the political system. Clearly, actors who use violence to resist devolving political power to those outside the hegemonic male group (meaning women) are committing political violence for gendered reasons. Such prevents the participation of women in politics even in the context of the pandemic. In reality, the pandemic has rolled back women’s participation in politics (Atkinson and Aaberg 2020, n.p). Thus, violence in both private and public space during the pandemic has further widened the gender gap in political participation.

Economic Ability

Political participation and economic wherewithal go together. First, the crisis is decreasing women’s economic security and increasing their unpaid domestic and care work (World Bank Group, 2020). Political campaigns and media coverage require a lot of financing, which the dynamics of the pandemic does not promote. From the economic standpoint, the economic toll in terms of losses resulting from closure and lockdowns impact directly the political financing of campaigns. In a scenario of money driven politics, women’s participation will be limited. It had been recognized prior the pandemic that economic inequalities experienced by women created a barrier to being nominated as a candidate, campaigning and successfully running for office. Further, in the midst of “a growing recognition that politics dominated by money is more often than not, politics dominated by men” (Casas-Zamara & Falguera 2016), the decrease in capital lowers the ability of women candidates to compete with male counterparts on a level playing field. Money is needed to purchase media time and develop campaign materials. To be effective, candidates, contestants must have the capital to make themselves visible in the media, which often takes financial resources that women candidates increasingly cannot afford.

In summary, women who have less independence because they lack the economic wherewithal and have increased domestic care work, as well as limited access to economic opportunities

due to lockdown may be subjected to increased domestic violence. This has a direct impact on their ability to vote freely, access resources to campaign for office or have the time to participate politically.

Inclusiveness

The assorted measures to keep people (including voters, candidates and other electoral stakeholders) safe by postponing elections can promote anything but inclusiveness. Specifically, it benefits incumbents, majority of whom are men. According to Saskia Brechenmacher, and Caroline Hubbard:

The Coronavirus pandemic continues to disrupt political processes around the world. Seventy-three elections have been postponed. Many parliaments have suspended or limited their activities, and over a hundred countries have restricted citizens' freedom of assembly and expression in the name of public health. As of January 2020, women made up less than a quarter of elected members of national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.)

The scenario painted above is an indication that the political landscape has a man's face and exclusionary as majority of women are pushed to the margin. A glaring example is COVID-19 task-force compositions, which available data show female representation in decision-making entities to be particularly small (Dheepa Rajan et al 2020). Furthermore, it is asserted that leadership of the committees managing COVID-19 related affairs are headed by mostly male. In this regard, Summer Forrester and Cheryl O'Brien have made the point that global coronavirus pandemic has reified divisions, inequity, and injustices rooted in systems of domination such as racism and sexism. A keen observer will not fail to notice that in the political debates, press briefings, and media discussions regarding the pandemic, it is senior male politicians that dominate. As Berenmacher and Hubbard have said, globally 85.2 percent of national level COVID-19 task forces include mostly men, and 81.2 percent are headed by male leaders. The pandemic to say the least has rendered women less visible. This is antidemocratic and cannot be divorced from broader systems of violence and their intersecting manifestations of oppression and power. (Cambridge.org/core/journal)

This imbalance in inclusiveness in which men (especially men from dominant social groups) remain over represented in political leadership posts and appointments to COVID-19 related Bodies is a replication of the pattern of gender inequality. This also reinforces gender stereotypes that associate men with political power and incorrectly relegate women to supporting roles or the domestic sphere.

Lessons to Learn and Opportunities to Explore

In his novel titled “The Plague”, Albert Camus points out that philosophy in time of a plague can’t be philosophy of everyday. It is the time to reflect on the philosophy of suffering and death and the implications of such for the human conduct globally. Relating Camus’ assertion to COVID -19 and its effects on gender, calls for an attitude that goes beyond everyday philosophy to asking questions as to the proper course of action to follow, whether to go the way of fatalism or consider what each and every one of us ought to do to alleviate suffering in the now.

Given the assorted political, ethical and existential contradictions, which the Corona virus has thrown up, there is a need to think outside the box and to bring forth ideas that can guide one’s active response to the crisis as this pertains to gender. Specifically, this calls for deep reflections about human existence and intersubjectivity, what is right or wrong in human relationships? What can one expect from society, politicians, leaders and what can one do for fellow human beings? (Jurgen Masure, Medium.com, downloaded July4, 2020). Following the above, the paper considers the following:

1. Paradigm Shift in Gender Thinking

COVID-19 is an enemy and a threat to the entire human race regardless of colour. One striking difference that has emerged so far is the death rates of men and women. In the United States of America, for example, twice as many men have been dying from the virus as women. Similarly, 69% of all Corona virus deaths across Western Europe have been male. Similar patterns have been seen in China and elsewhere. One theory concerning this difference in death rates is that women’s immune response is stronger than that of men. This is partly due to the fact that women have XX chromosomes, whereas men have only one, which is important when it comes to Corona virus (Bwire 2020, n.p <https://www.bbc.com>, Jian-Min Jin et.al, frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00152/full)

If there is any lesson to learn from the above scenario, it is the fact of common humanity of all regardless of race or gender. Such being the case, the gender dichotomy that tries to look down on the female sex and consign the position of inferiority to it, should give way to a perspective of gender that supports human flourishing of both men and women. Thus, in trying to tackle the crisis, there is the need for one to affirm that every life matters and has equal value and that competent men and women should be part of the drive to fight the COVID-19.

This calls for gender equality in the political sphere that allows men and women to transform both institutions and systems. Women’s full participation prior COVID-19 had been limited by higher poverty levels, insufficient financing, disproportionate care duties and exclusionary institutional rules, which are historically designed by men. COVID-19 has exacerbated these

contradictions. The paradigm shift must involve critically looking at enduring social norms and assumptions about gender roles and discrimination that negatively shape public perceptions about women's role in public life. It calls for an action plan to increase the representation of women.

The pandemic represents an opportunity to re-examine existing governance structures, as well as the gender norms that undermine the full participation and inclusion of women in such. One thing about crises is that they engender innovative thinking and can induce new behaviours. One believes that these new ways of looking at issues will help to create opportunities that will allow policies that can shift inequitable gender norms and thus give rise to more governance systems that will be gender sensitive and friendly. For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic leads public institutions, as well as private employers to rethink the way they work, such rethinking should also extend to the relationship between women and men in the private sphere especially as this pertains to sharing caring responsibilities. Quite a lot can be done to reflect such shifts that favour gender sensitivity in our parliaments, state bureaucracies, and political parties.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to interrogate the dynamics of gender politics in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic crisis. In pursuance of this purpose, the paper explored the concept of gender, as well as briefly that of politics with a view to highlighting how the two interfaces. The paper gave insight into some of the paradigms with which to measure political participation and inclusion. Effort was also made to look into the requirements of these paradigms and how COVID-19 impacts on them relative to gender. Thereafter, the paper looked at certain actions that need to be taken to address the contradictions thrown up by the pandemic. Following the outcome of one's deliberations in this paper, it has emerged that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender gaps and inequality. However, it has a lot of lessons to teach humanity regarding our common vulnerability and the need to show respect for human dignity, and promote ethics of care that enable human flourishing on the part of government.

Gender equality in the political domain is essential in order to carry both women and men along in political decisions. It calls for the need to make the number of female and male candidates for political positions as even as possible. Consistent with this, political parties are supposed to increase the proportion of female candidates running in national elections, prevent harassment, foster human resource development and help female members. In short, it aims to promote women's full and effective participation and decision making in public life.

Further gender equality in politics calls for policies to be enacted prohibiting discriminatory practices, as well as efforts to create a more enabling environment for women to realize their full potentials. It calls for an action plan to increase the representation of women in decision-

making centres and governance especially now, in light of the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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