



Simone de Beauvoir and a period of transition

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Accepted: 27 September 2020 / Published online: 14 October 2020
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Abstract This article discusses the global intensification of gender inequality during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. It reflects on the meaning of being a woman in the recent time of transition and the phenomenon of gender discrimination, which has been a lived experience of women worldwide. The article compares the Covid-19 situation seen through a gender lens with the previous period of transition described by Simone de Beauvoir seventy years ago. It argues that the post-pandemic world should be created from the feminist perspective that calls for social and educational change.

Keywords Covid-19 · Simone de Beauvoir · Gender inequality · New normal · Gender

“A syllogism is not useful in making mayonnaise or calming a child’s tears” (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 726)
“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 2002, p. 6)

I am writing this reflection amid the pandemic of Covid-19. It is an unusual time when, as the Nobel Prize laureate Olga Tokarczuk (2020) states, “the virus will alert to us another truth: how very much we aren’t equal”. She writes that now “before our eyes, the smoke is dispersing from the civilizational paradigm that has shaped us over the past two hundred years: that we are the masters of creation, that we can do anything, that the world belongs to us. A new time draws near” (Tokarczuk 2020). The pandemic has changed societies and economies, and everybody’s life is affected now due to the crisis. Unfortunately, as many have noticed, it has already turned out to be a bigger burden for women (Jeltsen 2020; Lewis 2020; Paskin 2020; Sanchez, Rodriguez, and Gralki 2020; Taub 2020).

Simone de Beauvoir (2011, p. 28) states that “women—except in certain abstract gatherings such as conferences—do not use ‘we’”. One cannot speak for all women collectively due to the lack of solidarity among all divided and conquered women, and especially

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of “white wimmin [...] colonized by white boys” with “wimmin of color” and other oppressed groups of females (Davenport 1983, pp. 88–89). However, since “no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex” (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 24), as a human being who “was not born but rather became woman” (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 330), I would like to use this opportunity to reflect on the recent situation and its consequences for women as it is also my lived experience.

I am writing this reflection not only as a woman but also as a mother, a wife, and a teacher. And a person, who also, like journalist Helen Lewis (2020), has enough of enthusiastic comments on a liberating experience of the quarantine and the possibilities awaiting all isolated at home. I have been staying at home with my family for quite some time now. I try to be informed, I follow the news, and I read a lot. I have just finished reading *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir again. I also keep reading the comments by famous journalists, tweets by known scholars, and statements by important scientists that now the circumstances of social, or rather physical distancing, allow for the extra time that can be used to be as fruitful and productive as Isaac Newton, William Shakespeare, John Keats, and others who managed to accomplish great things during difficult times. Apparently “‘stuck’ [at home] isn’t the word. ‘Liberated’ seems more like it” (Kluth 2020). And now is a perfect time to finally finish all the papers, apply for grants, write conference proposals, or at least learn a foreign language (see for example, Adams 2020; Kluth 2020).

On the other side of the spectrum, there are complaints about boredom and very long days spent mostly eating and napping, followed by a friendly pat on the back for stalling and an explanation that usefulness and creativity come from such a state. When it comes to the commentators, they seem not to consider that, as de Beauvoir states (2011, p. 98), “man’s case is radically different from woman’s”, whose situation has drastically changed.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been the lived experience of almost all the Earth’s population. And still, as seventy years ago, when Simone de Beauvoir was writing her monumental work, “anyone can clearly see that humanity is split into two categories of individuals” (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 24). Once again, the issue of gender equality loses its importance, becomes trivial, and, as Sarah Hendriks, the UN Women policy director states, it turns into “yet another victim of Covid-19” (Sanchez et al. 2020).

Despite the genderless approach to the immediate health crisis at first, there have been contradictory reports on biological factors influencing the chances of survival and death rates gender-wise (Mooney, Kaplan, and Kim 2020; Smith 2019). Pre-existing conditions (heart disease and diabetes), physical traumas and addictions (drinking and smoking), and biological differences (different immune-related genes and levels of hormones) are shown as problematic for men mostly as they significantly lower their chances of staying alive when infected with the coronavirus (Mooney et al. 2020; Niethammer 2020; Smith 2019). Gender disparities and inadequate assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of women in the healthcare system have a long history (Kent, Patel, and Varela 2012). And again, at these times, when more men become hospital patients observed, treated, and experimented on to adjust the cure, their needs may be addressed better because of the gender-related data gap (Niethammer 2020; Smith 2019).

The consequences of the body and the lifestyle in terms of gender are discussed in not only biological but also social contexts, both in recent articles and by de Beauvoir (2011). She quotes Freud’s words that “anatomy is destiny” (2011, p. 81). De Beauvoir (2011) also discusses the tendency of males to engage in dangerous, risky behaviors. During the pandemic, there has been alarm in the news about the lack of responsibility in young people, as shown by a male spring-breaker quoted by Lewis (2020): “If I get corona, I get corona. At the end of the day, I’m not gonna let it stop me from partying”.

Niethammer (2020) discusses different traveling styles depending on the means of transportation and mobility purposes. She suggests that since women use public transportation more and because they make more short trips because of their caretaking duties, they are more exposed and hence more vulnerable to the virus (Niethammer 2020). The type of job also affects the outcomes of getting and passing on the virus. Most unpaid and low-paid human care and service fields employees, such as teachers, flight attendants, healthcare and social workers, and family caregivers are women, and because they are constantly in close contact with many people, they are at an increased risk of infection (see for example, Gupta 2020; Niethammer 2020; Powell 2020).

When it comes to fighting the virus, what matters are not only biological factors but social ones as well. In many places around the world, the selection of people who get the priority of the hospital care and can benefit from treatment under the respirators depends not only on their medical condition but on their current social value. Treatment is reserved for younger and healthier bodies, who are stronger and have more chances for recovery. Numerous examples show that rich and famous people (well-known journalists and celebrities) and those in power (government officials and other authority figures) are being selected for the treatment first (see for example, Respers France 2020). Those who do not have to leave their homes and surround themselves with crowds every day because of their wealth or white-collar jobs, and in some countries also those who can afford the treatment (see for example, Barkan 2020; Kottasova, Luhby, and Di Donato 2020; Shtekel 2020) have a better chance of surviving the pandemic.

De Beauvoir (2011, p. 29) notices that “economically, men and women almost form two castes”. The patriarchal dividend, or the privileged position men are traditionally entitled to in society, is still present, even in Western societies (Connell 1995; Coontz 2012). Men still have the power that comes from that privileged status and, in turn, better-paid jobs. As in the past when “the classrooms, the mills, and domestic service” were the only work options possible for females (Grumet 1988, p. 83), the disadvantage of women continues today due to societal expectations and results in fewer career possibilities. Their social roles are still determined and tied to their unpaid caretaking practices (second shift work at home with no leisure time; engagement in the emotional labor of household management) and practicality (part-time or low-paid jobs or staying at home due to unemployment).

De Beauvoir wrote her fundamental work on women seventy years ago. It was “a period of transition” (2011, p. 185) that she welcomed with hope. Even though she stated that in no country was women’s status was equal to men’s, she noticed that the situation for women was improving, at least in the Western world. She also praised the situation of women in the Soviet Union as she enthusiastically reported on the promised revolutionary changes in the form of a country’s social support for working mothers.

Years later, and just recently, we have had the misfortune to enter another time of transition. The pandemic of Covid-19 significantly changes the situation for women. De Beauvoir (2011, p. 158) states that “when society is reorganized, she is rigidly enslaved again”. As stated in many articles, it is the woman who will suffer more both socially and economically due to the pandemic (Jeltsen 2020; Lewis 2020; Paskin 2020; Sanchez et al. 2020; Taub 2020).

Women are at a considerable disadvantage again in “a man’s world” (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 726), with limited opportunities outside the home. If they are lucky not to lose jobs now, they mostly perform low-paid or part-time work. With school closures and a shift to “virtual learning”, they are the ones who usually give up their plans to engage in child-caring and homeschooling practices.

In schools, before the Covid-19 pandemic, male administrators and theorists established policies and controlled female practitioners and then blamed them for failing to prepare “tomorrow’s leaders” able to reform the world (Grumet 1988, p. 154). It is worth noticing that while now a semantic change of education from brick-and-mortar schooling to remote learning is heavily promoted by the mostly male well-paid decision-makers who are ready to brag about their successes, these who try to make the unrealistic work of homeschooling happen are women again—the feminized teaching force (Grumet 1988) and mothers. It is this conflation of teaching and motherhood (Grumet 1988) that may serve as an example of how women have been positioned in education, which makes the gendered nature of society and its institutions even more evident.

Women are expected now to take care not only of children and the elderly but also of their sick partners. Where they are already responsible for housekeeping, they may now also assist their partners, who are sometimes the only breadwinners, in their home office work. As already known from history, in many cases their support is overlooked or suppressed, and it is mostly men who are credited and paid for the work.

For many women, living here and now has a completely literate meaning these days as again their “every day looks like the previous one; the present is eternal, useless, and hopeless” (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 540). De Beauvoir (2011, p. 185) notices that “personal accomplishments are almost impossible in human categories collectively kept in an inferior situation”, like the situation that keeps women secluded indoors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Again, as she writes (2011, p. 831), “by the very fact that she is in thrall to outside preoccupations, she does not commit herself entirely to her enterprise; thus, she profits from it less, and is more tempted to give it up”. It is also true again, as it was almost 100 years ago when Virginia Woolf (2002) stressed that having neither money nor her own space significantly narrows down a woman’s opportunities, whose creativity and productivity are very limited in the recent situation (Kitchener 2020).

Historically, after the times of crises women have been imposed the traditional roles of child-breeders and home caretakers by confinement in situations with options limited mostly to motherhood and homemaking (de Beauvoir 2011; Mebude-Steves 2020). Now even more than ever women are under a similar threat as they are experiencing problems because of “the servitudes of the female” lasting from puberty to menopause (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 65). And this trend may continue.

Due to the shelter-in-place, stay-at-home curfew and lockdown regulations locally, and canceled flights and closed borders countrywide and globally, women are having limited or restricted access to birth control and abortion and are experiencing problems with access to healthcare during their pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing period (Mebude-Steves 2020). Their lack of autonomy and subordination to men is resulting in an increase in domestic psychological and physical violence (Jeltsen 2020; Mebude-Steves 2020).

Although the Covid-19 pandemic affects everyone globally, it is certainly not the case that “we are all in this together” as António Guterres (2020), Secretary-General of the United Nations, states. While social, political, economic, and health disparities associated with histories of gender discrimination are not new, the pandemic has made them increasingly obvious and disturbingly evident worldwide. The Covid-19 pandemic affects women differently based on local and regional intersections of class, racial, and gender politics. The United States, for example, has a specific history of settler colonialism and slavery, which has institutionalized the exclusion of immigrant women, minoritized women, Indigenous women, women of color, and poor and working-class women from access to rights, privileges, and basic material conditions of human dignity in comparison to white women who have benefited from the patriarchal dividend (Connell 1995; Coontz 2012).

For women, the global commonality is that as the pandemic has brought economic crisis, it has also made economic inequality, and associated inequities, more visible. Women, especially women of color, are more acutely affected than men by this “shecession”, as C Nicole Mason, president and chief executive of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research called this year’s recession (Gupta 2020; Powell 2020). As discussed by Powell (2020), who coined the terms the “Gender of Covid” and the “Color of Covid”, the intersection of racial and gender disparities has particularly impacted minoritized women and women of color. These women, who are overrepresented in low-paying sectors such as hospitality, leisure, and education, have been disproportionately impacted by the global collapse of those industries and related job losses (Gupta 2020; Powell 2020). At the same time, they also constitute a major group of essential workers who risk their lives during the crisis because they cannot work remotely in the new stay-at-home economy (Powell 2020).

The pandemic has worsened the situation of women from minoritized groups, especially from Black and Latinx communities, as they increasingly struggle with food and housing insecurity and limited access to healthcare, childcare, and other services (Powell 2020; Viveiros and Bonomi 2020). Further, the Covid-19 pandemic has made the personal and economic precarity of many migrant and refugee women increasingly visible, particularly due to their own or family members’ status as “undocumented” or displaced and to cruel family immigrant separation policies (Women Refugee Commission 2020).

While some mourn life before the pandemic and hope to return to its normalcy, others try to imagine “the new normal” in the post-pandemic world (e.g., Harari 2020; Kalaichandran 2020; Pinsker 2020; Tokarczuk 2020). However, it is important to make sure that the new life after the pandemic is not built on traditional approaches adapted to the new situation which for women would mostly mean going back to the same old or even more intense normalcy of gender discrimination and for society returning to schooling that “continues to imitate the spatial, temporal, and ritual order of industry and bureaucracy indicat[ing] the complicity of both men and women in support of paternal authority” (Grumet 1988, p. 24).

Arundhati Roy (2020) writes that, “historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next”. Unfortunately, it seems that “across the world, women’s independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic” (Lewis 2020), unless we dare to break up with the past and build a new status quo instead of returning to the normalcy of gender inequality and schools reproducing the society as we know it and replicating the patriarchal structure of the family (Grumet 1988) in the world before the pandemic.

Seventy years ago, when commenting on another period of transition, de Beauvoir (2011, p. 188) wrote that “what determines women’s present situation is the stubborn survival of the most ancient traditions in the new emerging civilization”. The new reality after the Covid-19 pandemic should be created from the feminist perspective which calls for social and educational change.

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