12 COVID-19 and feminist methods: one year later¹

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A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, with new hope but no clear end point, lessons for gender researchers have become both more obvious and more frustrating. From the beginning, COVID-19 visibly functioned as a giant sorting mechanism. In the United States, early reports highlighted that it separated the young from the old, women from men, the healthy from the at-risk, those deemed in essential services from the rest of the workforce, the homed from the homeless, the urban from the rural, even the right from the left. Most of all, but largely unsaid, it divides the privileged from the poor and marginalized. Fundamental social cleavages are deeply implicated in who is most vulnerable, how the virus is spread, what are the consequences, and what recovery might look like. The usual suspects of gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and class figure prominently and urgently. Every source of information, whether from researchers, journalists, or friends and family, underscores the relevance and necessity of deep dives into intersectional analysis based on demographic, social, and spatial locations. These sources also highlight the obstacles to this approach and the ensuing costs to research and policy for gender analysis, following the precepts of feminist theory and epistemology.²

Although no surprise to gender researchers, for many observers COVID-19 has been a wakeup call on society's dependence on and the precarity of women's work in a deeply and systemically unequal gendered division of labor. Whether paid or unpaid but too often invisible and devalued, women's work features prominently both as providers and targets. Women disproportionately work in the service industries where they are either deemed essential or are out of a job – health care workers and cleaners on the one hand, restaurant servers and retail workers on the other – and some fall in between, such as teachers and day care providers whose services are variously defined as essential or not, as the political winds blow. They are agricultural workers in an industry that remains stereotyped as male. At home they are the primary care takers with the normal heavy responsibilities

multiplied during social isolation. The vulnerabilities and burdens are magnified when race and class are added to the mix. Documenting these and the numerous other inequities of the pandemic is critical to better understanding the many differential impacts buried in the rhetoric of a “pandemic” that in principle affects everyone equally but actually varies widely. Yet in a cruel irony, it is harder than ever to accomplish this work.

The situation is deeply frustrating because it embodies a contradiction. At a time when we need additional, rigorous, and in-depth research into the intersectional gendered impacts of global disaster, it has been difficult-to-impossible to conduct direct research on what is happening in the field. The activities necessary to continue many research projects, both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related, are in direct contravention to safety requirements, restrictions imposed by sponsoring institutions, and basic common sense. It has been impossible to travel, to interview, to observe, and document in person what is happening, and even if it were possible, it would defy fundamental ethical obligations to the participants of such study. The more remote the location or the fewer the resources available to the community, the more important it is to understand and document the realities on the ground, but the greater the barriers to doing so. The first obligation of any research is to do no harm, and in ordinary circumstances with reasonable precautions and observance of human subject protocols, that is not an issue. But in the case of a worldwide pandemic, any effort must be regarded as a potential harm to be avoided until safety can be assured for participants, researchers, and their respective communities. We need to hear diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences, and as researchers we need to facilitate their dissemination. During the pandemic, up to the time of writing and for the foreseeable future, this has been difficult and, in many cases, impossible.

A case in point: on March 1, 2020, I returned home to State College, Pennsylvania, from a scoping trip in Dillingham Alaska for collaborators on a large transdisciplinary research project on the impacts of climate change in coastal Alaskan communities. The spread of coronavirus in the United States was just becoming obvious, and we were glad to get home, although its extent and impacts were only starting to be experienced. A few short weeks later, we went into “lockdown” mode, sheltering in place “to flatten the curve” of its transmission. The curve resisted flattening, climbing ever higher amid controversy over appropriate public health measures, while project team members, university faculty, and members of the larger population with the luxury of maintaining distance and belief in science withdrew from all but virtual social contact. As we practiced social isolation, many remote Alaskan villages, remembering the devastation brought by past epidemics, practiced entire community isolation, restricting access

Figure 12.1 Community activism in Dillingham, Alaska (Ann R. Tickamyer).

to outsiders; others struggled with the consequences of lacking that control; both modes with implications for health, safety, and food security (Figures 12.1 and 12.2).

The trip to Alaska was to be the first to different coastal communities particularly threatened by rising temperatures to establish relations, trust, access, communication, and permission for future research on the complex

Figure 12.2 Community activism in Dillingham parade (Ann R. Tickamyer).

connections between food security, migration, and climate change in the Arctic and its gendered practices and consequences. Polar regions are experiencing warming at a much higher rate than more temperate locations. Tribal and indigenous communities heavily depend on subsistence activities for food security, sovereignty, and cultural continuity that are threatened by climate change. The purpose of our research is to document and analyze the links between rising temperatures, threats to infrastructure, and individual, family, and community impacts and responses. This work requires the cooperation and participation of the communities in question, but that entails building trust and avenues of communication. Many tribal communities, remembering the devastation brought by past incursions of Western authorities and the diseases and dislocations they introduced, carefully guard prerogatives to determine with whom and when to participate in research projects. Many also have relatively few resources to connect virtually through broadband access. The ubiquitous Zoom meetings of academic life during the pandemic are alien to locations with absent, limited, or expensive connectivity. Access was already a high hurdle; now it has been deferred with no clear path to when and how it can be established or resumed. As the lone gender researcher on the project, this is particularly distressing given how few studies on this topic have used a gendered lens.

Research around the world repeats this scenario. Many projects have shut down or gone on hiatus, with no clear time frame for resumption. In some places preestablished relationships and ongoing data collection by local researchers continue either directly or virtually, but in many cases it has been suspended or radically transformed. Where possible, phone, video, and mail substitute for field research, but often with deep compromise in the nature and quality of the data amid many limits to the reach of virtual communication methods. Even in the United States, large segments of rural populations have little access to broadband and wireless communications. Remote portions of Alaska surrounded by wilderness are by no means the only example. In my state of Pennsylvania, it is estimated that somewhere between a third to one half of residents lack connectivity, primarily in rural areas and among low-income households (Meinrath et al. 2019), and this is repeated across the country. Worldwide, the more marginalized the group, the more likely they are to have limited or no access. Furthermore, the greater the gender inequality, the less likely women will have access to the Internet or freedom to participate in a research study, even if there is community or household access. Researchers worry that efforts to talk to women in problematic settings will spark distrust and even violence. Many reports from around the world suggest an increase in family violence from the loss of livelihoods and the isolation measures advocated for virus protection. This situation desperately requires serious inquiry and research to

determine the extent of the problem. Researchers and activists attempting to reach women in isolated households, especially in highly patriarchal and sex-segregated communities and cultures require great ingenuity to ascertain whether women are free to speak but have little recourse when denied except taking care to keep their research from creating suspicion or exacerbating vulnerabilities.

What is to be done? There are few easy answers. I have previously advocated for better attention to how well feminist ideals in research are put into practice. As illustrated by multiple pieces in this volume, the first step is to ensure that data collection and analysis are disaggregated by sex. This best practice remains far from universal, including most recently in COVID-19 reports and studies. We know that rural food and agricultural workers have been hard-hit by the virus. Some of the earliest reports indicated disruption of the food supply from outbreaks in food processing plants and among field workers. We also know that men and women experience the disease differently, possibly at different rates, and with different recovery times and processes. We do not know how these and other gender differences manifest among food and agricultural workers. The data may exist but have not been widely disseminated. This is also a lesson in the importance of remembering that a gender lens includes men and masculinities and nonbinary gender identification as critical areas for research.

Beyond that basic step, participatory methods become a critically important practice, particularly, moving beyond advocacy to an actuality. This is primarily appropriate in fieldwork, one of the reasons why qualitative methods feature so prominently in feminist methodology, but opportunities for meaningful participation should be evaluated for all forms of data collection. Here, too, the ethical and the practical coincide. Potentially, this can enable easier continuation of research by local collaborators even where outside researchers lose access. It is not a solution but moves in the right direction.

Case in point 2: long before the Alaskan research, I have been a collaborator on research on gender roles, ideology, and practices in Indonesia, and how these relate to resilience in disaster (Tickamyer and Kusujiarti 2020). The summer of 2020 was to include a trip to Indonesia to consult with colleagues there and to conduct follow-up research, a plan upended by the pandemic. Fortunately, work continues, although not necessarily as we had planned, because of the ongoing collaboration with local researchers and their experience conducting participatory research. Of course, like the rest of the world, health and safety restrictions and precautions hamper their work, but to the extent possible, it continues (Figure 12.3).

Sex-disaggregated data is the tip of the iceberg. Intersectional analysis requires more extensive demographic data on relevant social locations.

Figure 12.3 Feminist methods workshop in Indonesia (Ann R. Tickamyer).

US food and agricultural workers again illustrate. Very large proportions of these workforces are race and ethnic minorities, often located in rural areas, often immigrants, sometimes undocumented, and invariably low-income. Diligent efforts by journalists to ferret out news about the pandemic have made it clear that these are among the populations who have experienced the most devastation from COVID-19, with high incidence of infection, morbidity, and mortality. It should not be necessary to rely on piecing together news items from around the country, however rigorously investigated, to see a complete picture of disease disparities. Even with the highest standards, news accounts are not likely to have the rigor of social-science-directed investigation or to use the same frameworks. For example, feminist scholars and practitioners applying an intersectional framework need to think carefully about the categories necessary for the analysis both generally and in the specific case. These are not static nor predefined but must be applied in conjunction with context in mind.

Another important step in line with feminist methodology requires practicing reflexivity and introspection. Lia Bryant's chapter in this volume describes autoethnography: writing memories of persons, places, events, and interactions in the third person to stimulate deeper understanding of their

meaning and significance. As a researcher grounded and barred from making new observations in the field, such work strengthens powers of reflection, creating new “muscles” of introspection that enhance insight and even lead to new avenues of inquiry. Social isolation, working from home, increased self-provisioning and care work, reliance on Zoom and other forms of technology, and always the threat of disease and illness, are conducive to forming new research questions about how these factors unfold and are experienced in the lives of both the researcher and their subjects. As difficult as it has been from a position of relative privilege, one can only imagine the hardships experienced by those with fewer resources, but it is incumbent on us to do so. It also is necessary to advocate for support and change. Many of the chapters in this book detail the increased burdens of care and precarity that have fallen to women with little respite or assistance. While forms, sources, and amounts of support vary around the world, in most places they have been woefully inadequate, exacerbating gender inequities, and putting the onus on individual women and families to cope. Transformational change requires collective action.

Finally, feminist and gender scholars must take every opportunity to highlight inequalities with research designed to uncover power dynamics and differentials to advocate for women’s empowerment and gender transformation in agriculture, food production, and beyond. This is particularly apropos at a time when the realities of pandemic vulnerabilities and inequities intersect with those occasioned by the pain and violence of police brutality, institutional and individual racism, and growing inability to hide from the realities of the cruelties and oppression experienced by persons of color on the one hand and various forms of white privilege on the other. This is true from my vantage point in the United States, but also applies globally where gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality targeted forms of violence and deprivation taken separately and together are no strangers to people’s lives. Protest has spread from the United States to become a global movement. Pandemic social isolation has not spared us scenes of horrifying violence ranging from mass shootings in the United States to attacks on democratic institutions and demonstrators in the United States and Myanmar. Less shocking but equally disturbing, disasters, both natural and human-induced, continue to damage lives and livelihoods with floods, famine, fire, and plague that also have intersectionality-defined differences in vulnerabilities, impacts, and outcomes.

Many pundits speculate on what life will look like if and when we emerge on the other side of these intertwined disasters. It is incumbent on feminist researchers to be prepared to study, participate, and help shape the new reality.

Notes

- 1 This research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation (Award # ICER-1927827).
- 2 See Tickamyer and Sexsmith (2019) and Tickamyer (2020) for descriptions and discussions of feminist methodology.

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