

Exploring the enhanced spatial marginalisation of women and LGBTQ+ people as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK

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Abstract

In this essay, we will explore how women and the LGBTQ+ communities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on its socio-economic effects. These effects have ultimately increased the marginalisation of the discussed groups through changing how space is 'lived in' and experienced. We will look at the heightened subjection of women to forms of oppression in the *domestic space*. We will then examine how *public* space can be a site of increased violence during the pandemic for some members of the LGBTQ+ community, but for others its closure confines people to the often volatile domestic space, placing further mental strain on this group. Marginalising power structures in *virtual spaces* are exacerbated with more time spent online. We will conclude by attempting to draw attention to and provoke discussion surrounding marginalised groups' experiences during the pandemic

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had, and indeed continues to have, socio-economic implications in the UK, with over 4 million cases in total (UK Government, 2021). Not unlike previous global crises, the pandemic has disproportionately affected the most marginalised groups in society. In this essay, we will focus on marginalised genders and sexualities in particular. We will explore how their use and experience of space has been negatively affected as a result of a virus which in itself is not actively discriminatory, yet its impacts have been superimposed upon and have perpetuated existing societal gendered inequalities and power structures.

In order to demonstrate how the response to the pandemic has changed the use of space, one must first establish its meaning. Space is a fundamental way in which our lives can be viewed. Space can be tangible; something that can be lived in, passed through and physically surrounds us. It can also be intangible,

like aspects to the world that are not material, but may still affect our lives. Our approach to understanding how COVID-19 has increased the marginalisation of genders and sexualities relies on viewing space in its different 'forms'. This involves firstly looking at the domestic – that is, the home – space, then at public, accessible or indeed inaccessible spaces and finally at online, virtual ones.

An approach like this must also recognise how our own positionalities influence our collaboration in research. This is integral to addressing a question as personal as gender and sexuality (see Gibson-Graham, 1994; Richardson, 2015). Our interpretation of how space is gendered is unique and situated within our own experiences as a white, heterosexual male and female; others will perceive space in entirely different ways, with their knowledge built around their own experiences. Therefore, our approach is neither intended to be objective, nor an attempt to reinforce the normative binary that exists surrounding gender. We will use this binary, despite its problematic nature, as well as looking beyond it, to draw attention to historically oppressed groups of society and how such marginalisation can be visible within space now more than ever. We must also recognise the disproportionately high number of BAME individuals adversely affected by COVID-19 in the UK and beyond as existing systemic inequalities are amplified (see Coates, 2020; Razai et al, 2021). However, these complexities lie outside the scope of our essay which is primarily grounded in gendered and sexuality-related experiences. We hope that acknowledging the enhanced gender disparities as a result of the pandemic will clarify the path towards equality.

2. Domestic space

Masculine thinking, or phallocentrism, is applicable to how domestic space was gendered in the 20th century (Pratt, 2009). The domestic space was a site for female oppression. The so-called 'Great Domestication' conditioned women into fulfilling a gendered purpose centred around the domestic space: to serve men – in itself propping up the labour force and capitalist system – and to child-rear (Moore & Patel, 2017). By placing them into a subservient role to care for men, women essentially were 'cheapened' to being an unrecognised, hidden part of the labour force, confined to the home. Indeed, lack of childcare facilities available prior to the 1980s kept women confined in this space, ensuring social reproduction in a deeply patriarchal society (Federici, 1998, cited in Moore & Patel, 2017), which is still just as prevalent today. At the beginning of 2020 the gendered division of child care remained unequal – women, in particular those who are married, spent twice as much time on housework and childcare responsibilities as men (Manzo & Minello, 2020). The onset of the pandemic has placed even higher levels of stress and responsibility on women, particularly cisgender women who make up 90% of

single parents (Henriques, 2020). With the introduction of the first lockdown in March 2020 and the consequent inability to access childcare, they have had to balance work with looking after their children. In the case of critical workers, it would be even more difficult as remote learning would not be feasible and ultimately many women may have to file for unemployment (Villarreal, 2020). As such, the work space of an increasing number of women is amalgamated with the domestic space, hence exacerbating the gendered nature of the domestic space to be intrinsically female.

Increased confinement to these domestic spaces has led to heightened levels of violence in the home, leading to what the UN (2020) describes as a “shadow pandemic”. As stresses stemming from economic and health concerns have emerged, abuse in relationships has become even more prevalent, evidenced by global cases of domestic violence increasing by 20% (Mohan, 2020), with the vast majority of these being against women. A space typically associated with familiarity and safety for most, the home, has become one of conflict and danger for victims of domestic violence. Furthermore, restrictions on movement have meant women are unable to escape from their abusers to seek refuge, whether that be permanently or even just a short period (Henriques, 2020). This has led to a desperate situation for many women, as it has signified the shrinking of potential ‘safe’ spaces, such as face-to-face support networks of friends and professional help, away from the ‘threatening’ spaces in which they have been so restricted to. Hence, for some women, the pandemic has meant that domestic space has become ever more confining as well as a site of hostility and conflict.

3. Public space

Similarly, for the LGBTQ+ community there has been increased confinement to the domestic space as a result of the closure of public spaces, such as gay bars and clubs. The Manchester ‘gay village’ in particular has been investigated as a space of belonging and safety for the LGBTQ+ community (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004). In essence, these ‘gay villages’ can be their ‘safe’ spaces where they are able to express themselves outside of the domestic space and are distanced from heteronormative surroundings (Costa & Pires, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about the large-scale closure of these spaces, something which has inevitably led to the declining mental health and quality of life of LGBTQ+ people (Browne, Banerjea & Bakshi, 2020). This may hold adverse effects for the community, even once the short term implications of the pandemic have come to an end (Batty, 2020).

However, for many members of the LGBTQ+ community within the UK and globally, public space can also be a site of violence or a place where they are made to feel unwelcome. As of 2013, one in five members of the LGBTQ+

community experienced some form of hate crime or incident against their gender or sexual identity in public spaces (Bachmann & Gooch, 2013). Since the outset of the pandemic, a report to the UN Assembly suggested several European countries had experienced an increase in the number of selective arrests of LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as heightened risk of physical abuse in outdoor spaces (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020). As well as disproportionately being the recipients of violent behaviour, some LGBTQ+ individuals have been made to feel 'outsiders' in public space. For homeless LGBTQ+ individuals, their experiences can demonstrate how the intersection of two marginalised groups, being homeless and LGBTQ+, can create a unique set of challenges in an often hostile environment in public space. Considered to be 'social cleansing' (Lees & White, 2019), homeless LGBTQ+ individuals were sometimes forced to participate in social housing programmes. This involved relocating homeless LGBTQ+ individuals from the streets into communal living accommodation, where the crowded conditions increased the risk of contracting COVID-19 and falling ill (Madrigal-Borloz, 2020). Thus, the violence in or exclusion from public space some LGBTQ+ people face carries significant implications for these individuals and should be addressed.

4. Virtual space

Outside of the tangible spaces, the home or the city, the creation of virtual spaces on the Internet has led to a reinforcement of existing gendered inequalities. While the digital realm has created several opportunities for women, the existing gendered disparities in accessibility and usage has hindered these efforts (Nefesh-Clarke et al., 2020). At a global scale, the proportion of women using the internet is 12% lower than that of men (ITU, 2020). Thus, beneficial services and opportunities such as increased work flexibility, mobile banking, support for victims of domestic violence and political engagement among others (Herbert, 2017) are unable to be accessed by the very groups they are designed to support. The increased shift of services in these sectors from in person to online as a result of the pandemic has thus heightened this inaccessibility. Furthermore, the move to online learning has perpetuated gendered inequalities within education, even in circumstances where provision of technology at home is not an issue. Enduring cultural norms within many households prioritise the education of boys over girls, which in the context of the pandemic has to some extent overturned global progress made in the equity of educational opportunity (Nefesh-Clarke et al., 2020).

Furthermore, with imagery like the Hypocrite Feminist (Figure 1) freely circulating across the Internet, these posts act as a discursive barrier to the equality movement through collectivising all feminist thinking under one, heavily exaggerated banner: the "belligerent, white woman" (Brooke,

2019). Not only do such images try to exclude women from virtual space, but they attempt to normalise anti-feminist behaviour as humour, legitimising sexist comments and imagery as 'just a joke'. Within this, a power imbalance exists between men, the insiders in Reddit's virtual space, and women who are marginalised 'outsiders'. Similarly, blatant homophobia and transphobia is displayed in trolling across various social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram, seen in the deliberate misgendering of transgender people, for instance. The anonymous, separated nature of virtual space has meant that prejudicial and provocative discourse faces limited social sanctions and so there is little accountability for posting something that would be considered socially unacceptable in palpable spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant more time is being spent online, with people from the UK spending approximately 36% more time on social media in April than in January of 2020 (Martin, 2020). Although for some this has been comforting and a critical lifeline in the form of continued contact with friends and family (Hall, 2020), for others increased time spent online has led to the perpetuation and possible intensification of existing oppressive and patriarchal structures online (Glitch UK and EVAW, 2020).



Figure 1. Hypocrite Feminist. Source: Reddit.

5. Conclusions

The findings explored point to a disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalised peoples, a factor that should be considered by policy makers and

government when considering wider impacts and long term responses to COVID-19. This has occurred through the intensification of the gendering of space, heightening the marginalisation of already oppressed genders and sexualities in society. This is demonstrated by the combining of the work space and the domestic space, which for women in particular presents further opportunities for oppression, as the 'traditional,' socially-constructed role of women in the home is exacerbated. With stringent stay-at-home measures in place across the globe increased confinement to homes has intensified domestic violence. Therefore, while the domestic space has become more female, it is also a site of hostility for both women and LGBTQ+ individuals due to the 'shrinking' of public space and resultant lack of 'safe' outlets. Nevertheless, places of 'safety' are relative to the individual; the public space has too been made hostile for homeless members of the LGBTQ+ community through increased risk of being arrested or even removed from the streets. Furthermore, the issues associated with being bound to the domestic setting perpetuates online discrimination of these marginalised groups further through increased time spent 'in' often harmful virtual spaces. Thus, the effects of the pandemic on genders and sexualities marginalised in society are widespread, reaching into various tangible and intangible spaces and taking on different forms. Only with inclusivity and communication with marginalised groups, most importantly in cases where research is conducted by those more privileged, can the wounds created by the pandemic be healed and the heteronormative binaries be deconstructed in an effort to create a more egalitarian society.

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