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The Girl in the Pandemic

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Time during a Pandemic

"Time is a complex and endlessly fascinating phenomenon, not simply the medium through which we do research, but an important topic of enquiry in its own right" (Neale 2010: 3). Time has been a crucial feature in the lives of girls and young women during the pandemic. Schools closed down and learning time was lost. For many girls and young women, it has not been clear that life will ever be the same, especially since extensive economic disruption can limit what is possible for any young person. While temporality is a feature of many academic publications, especially those dealing with health and humanitarian crises, there is, we think, an even greater responsibility to be aware of in writing about the lives of young people. Features of short- and long-term impact are inevitably in flux, so there is a great risk at any one time of misrepresenting the impact of crisis on young people's lives, as Claudia Mitchell (2014) and Shannon Walsh (2012) point out. See also *In My Life: Stories of Youth Activists in South Africa, 2002–2022* (Walsh et al. 2022). But time has also featured signifi-

Notes for this section can be found on page 10.

cantly in the process of publishing this book about girls in a pandemic. Inevitably, ironically enough, COVID-19 itself caused significant delays between our conceptualization of the book and its publication. When we first started working on it in the early days of the pandemic, we imagined that it would be a collection of chapters from around the globe that would be full of observations of what was learned. First drafts of most of the chapters of the *Girl in the Pandemic* were written months before there was any idea of a vaccine anywhere in the world, and long before terms like "variants" and "vaccine hesitancy," along with "social distancing" and "self-isolation," had entered our everyday vocabulary. Also, we need to take into account the complexity of tense when authors talk about the ever-changing present, the recurring past, and the uncertain future.

In 1722, Daniel Defoe wrote his classic *A Journal of the Plague Year: Being Observations or Memorials, of the most Remarkable Occurrences, as well Publick as Private, which happened in London During the last Great Visitation In 1665*, commonly called *A Journal of the Plague Year*. The book, about the experiences of one man, was written fifty-seven years after the last outbreak of bubonic plague, which became known as the Great Plague of London, struck the city. He did not write it from the vantage point of living through the plague, which he did only as a five-year-old child. None of the authors of the chapters in this book had the luxury of having such a perspective; they wrote about the pandemic as it was unfolding.

For this reason, we begin this introduction with reference to the challenges faced by authors in writing chapters about events as they were happening, to be published in a book that has necessarily taken several years to be completed. Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Ishani Anwesha Joshi (2022: 1) note that

> [t]he event of the pandemic has not only bifurcated our perception of time in terms of a "before" and an "after" but also complicated our awareness and experience of time. Put differently, an epochal transformation caused by pandemics has shifted our temporal experience from the calendar/clock time to a queer time situated outside of formal time-related constructions. The pandemic also implies a dismantling and rearranging of the fundamental structures of time within which human beings interacted with the world. Such a discontinuity in the linear trajectory of chronological time engenders an epistemic and ontological reconfiguration of the very sense of time itself.

They go on to argue that "a shift in the perception of time precipitates an altered spatio-temporal awareness that informs postpandemic discourses and power structures" (ibid.).

In quoting Elizabeth El Refaie (2012) that "specific situations in which we find ourselves can have an impact on our time perceptions" Venkatesan and Joshi (2022: 2) note the complexity of how we now think of the past, the present, and the future in the context of the pandemic and how this leads to and necessitates a different view of time. For example, during lockdown, we might say, or have said, in the same sentence, "We did this" and "we hope to do that," but then the lockdowns continue or are reinstituted, so the future is still the present. Or we might write about measures that are being taken as having been in the past, since at the time of writing it appears that things are improving, only for us to be hit by a new variant, so that the past is still present. While verb tense is not explicitly described as part of what Venkatesan and Joshi refer to as "pandemic time" (ibid.), we see the problematics of verb tense in pandemic time as part of academic publishing during COVID-19. As we know, academic writing is conventionally based on a long process of first developing abstracts or short proposals in response to a call, writing full drafts, having the writing submitted to peer review, and so on, and this lapse of time, coupled with the delays related directly in one way or another to COVID-19 itself, posed a dilemma in relation to the fluidity of the situation for our authors and ourselves; this allows us to recognize and acknowledge that the tenses used in these chapters might sound out of line. Unlike in more journalistic forms of writing or even the many briefing documents issued by NGOs in the early days of the pandemic on the situation of girls and young women, in writing chapters in an ever-evolving situation like this pandemic, the use of future tense might quickly become replaced by the past tense, only to become present tense. Authors were sometimes compelled to write in speculative ways and often in the language of the tentative through the use of conditional clauses. Many of the girls and young women who were involved in telephone and Zoom interviews spoke about a possible future, what they were currently doing, and what they would do if and when the pandemic ended (or would end or might end). Overall, we see this challenge of representing the past, present, and future as informing the idea of "pandemic time" and consider its impact on academic writing.

About this Book

The chapters in this book bring together work from eight countries across four continents (Argentina, Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, India, Po-

land, South Africa, Thailand, and Uganda), with most of the chapters written by scholars in the Global South. Given the inequities in health and education that the pandemic has highlighted, it is *even* more critical now than ever that Southern scholarship informs what we know about the lives of girls and young women in the context of COVID-19. But beyond geography, the spaces of investigation and reporting cut across schools, hospitals, universities, and streets.

We have organized this book into three main parts: Part I: Reflections; Part II: Continuing Education; and Part III: Vulnerabilities.

Part I: Reflections

Chapter 1, Nidhi Kapur's "Five Lessons from Past Ebola Epidemics for Today's COVID-19 Pandemic," considers "how key learning from the Ebola epidemic might translate into concrete advice to enable policymakers and practitioners to actively anticipate, locate, and mitigate the evolving gender-driven consequences of COVID-19."[1] Kapur considers the disproportionate impact of the "gendered dimensions of infectious disease outbreaks . . . on girls and young women."

In Chapter 2, "How to Build 'Meaningful Bonds' with Poor Young Women? State Interventions during the Lockdown in Argentina," Ana Cecilia Gaitán, whose feminist research is based on political anthropology, focuses on a "suburban area of Greater Buenos Aires that has high rates of poverty, population density, and COVID-19 infection." She explains that, given "the lockdown enforced in Argentina to contain COVID-19 spread," the centers "in which girls and young women [found] support in facing violent situations and other restrictions on their autonomy were closed," so the state responded by "converting itself in relation to its social policies aimed at children and young people." She analyzes this response and "pose[s] questions related to the virtualization of these policies."

In Chapter 3, "What It All Means: Young Rural Women in South Africa Confronting COVID-19," Nokukhanya Ngcobo, Zinhle Nkosi, and Ayub Sheik, noting how COVID-19 intensified "the vulnerability of young women . . . living in remote rural areas of South Africa [who] face the harsh realities of inequalities and poverty," analyze the written narratives of eight South African university students (aged between seventeen and twenty-six) and the content of follow-up telephone interviews. Their findings suggest that "household chores, economic stress, and sexual violence have all been exacerbated by the pandemic" and attribute this to a

4

"pervasive hypersexual culture and patriarchal conventions that operate as ideologically normative."

Part II: (Dis)continuing Education

This part begins with "Women Teachers Support Girls during the COVID-19 School Closures in Uganda" by Christine Apiot Okudi. This chapter points out that although the gender gap in the education of children in Uganda has narrowed, the seriously worrying conditions related to girls' education in this country are being compounded by the "COVID-19 pandemic [that] is holding back [this] development." We learn that "[i]ncreasing numbers of girls are being affected by child-with-child sexual relations and rape, both of which [may] lead to early pregnancy." Okudi points out that, as "World Vision International (2020) [has noted]," "the girls in . . . vulnerable communities like the refugee settlements are [being] seriously affected."

In Chapter 5, "Experiencing Care: Young Women's Response to COVID-19 Crises in Poland," Anna Bednarczyk, Zuzanna Kapciak, Kinga Madejczak, Alicja Sędzikowska, Natalia Witek, and Faustyna Zdziarska explore "in a multivoiced narrative . . . the grassroots initiative Dinners in the Time of Pandemic [that was] led by . . . a group of sociology students who met on an Introduction to Feminism course at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow [and who] decided to do something about the emerging cases of families and individuals who were facing food insecurity caused by the lockdown in Krakow." They use Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto's (1990) "concept of care as a process" as their framework.

In Chapter 6, "COVID-19, Education, and Well-Being Experiences of Female Agriculture Students in Ethiopia," Hannah Pugh, Eleni Negash, Frehiwot Tesfaye, and Madalyn Nielsen examine how the COVID-19 pandemic is increasing the "preexisting gender inequalities among young women, aged between eighteen and twenty-one, who were studying at agricultural colleges in Ethiopia and who have now returned to their family homes." Their key findings from "twenty-two semi-structured interviews with female students" indicate that these young women "have suffered negative socioeconomic consequences, have lacked resources to continue their education at home, and have experienced increased mental health problems and an increased fear of being subjected to sex- and gender-based violence."

In Chapter 7, "Exploring the Psychosocial Experiences of Women Undergraduates in Delhi, India, during the COVID-19 Pandemic," Ri-

cha Rana, Poonam Yadav, and Shreya Sandhu point out that the experiences of girls and young women during the lockdown imposed on them by COVID-19 have been affected by "existing gender inequalities and social isolation" and consider "the nature of the psychosocial issues faced by women undergraduates and the coping strategies they . . . adopted." These authors conducted qualitative research that "reveals how the new normal has confined these young women to their homes and to their immediate family environment," and they discuss "how the already-gendered lives of these women undergraduates have now come under new stresses related to academic, economic, and sociocultural uncertainties."

Part III: Vulnerabilities

This part begins with Chapter 8, "Lockdown and Violence against Women and Children: Insights from Hospital-Based Crisis Intervention Centers in Mumbai, India" by Anupriya Singh, Sangeeta Rege, and Anagha Pradhan. In this chapter, the authors begin by explaining how the COVID-19 pandemic in India "overwhelmed the health system" and discuss how "the subsequent lockdown posed challenges for the adolescent girls and young women survivors of gender-based violence." This was compounded by the "suspension of court hearings and the disruption of healthcare and support services" for young girls, but we learn that in Mumbai "all Dilaasa centers (public hospital-based crisis intervention departments)" remained functional. The authors go on to recount "the experiences of girls and young women who sought support at Dilaasa centers in person or by telephone."

In Chapter 9, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Marriage in India," Gayatri Sharma and Ayesha Khaliq discuss the implications of the likely increase in child marriage resulting from COVID-19 for the already-vulnerable "Dalits (Scheduled Castes who rank lowest in the caste hierarchy), Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes or Indigenous people), and Muslim people who are marginalized both economically and in terms of religious discrimination." They point out that "the government's response to the massive surge in child marriage has to be targeted toward addressing the concerns of these vulnerable people" who have already "borne the brunt of the socioeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 response."

In Chapter 10, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Domestic Workers in Ethiopia," Annabel Erulkar, Welela Tarekegne, and Eyasu Hailu introduce us to the education and mentoring program Biruh Tesfa ("bright future") for All . . . that is aimed at supporting, among

others, poverty-stricken children. They discuss what they learned from twenty-four telephone interviews with "project beneficiaries (including domestic workers) and mentors" after this program was suspended because of COVID-19. We learn that many girls "found themselves out of work with no income, no accommodation, and no support of any kind" and that those who remained employed "had to undertake all the household tasks that entailed exposure to the risk of COVID-19."

Finally, in Chapter 11, "The New Normal for Young Transgender Women in Thailand: Unspoken Gender-Based Violence in the Time of COVID-19," Rapeepun Jommaroeng, Sara Hair, Cheera Thongkrajai, Kath Kangbipoon, and Suda Bootchadee discuss what they learned during the twenty in-depth telephone interviews they conducted with young transgender women aged between eighteen and twenty-five. They point out that these women already "experience higher rates of gender-based violence and discrimination" and that "desperation and frustration during the COVID-19 outbreak could force them to engage in higher risk activities, like sex work, for survival." The "new normal" includes the reluctance of those requiring HIV testing and treatment, as well as hormone therapy, "to visit health facilities because of fears related to COVID-19."

So Much to Learn

We see this book as contributing to deepening an understanding of what scholars, activists, and practitioners were and are learning about girls and young women at particular moments in the evolution of the pandemic. Absent from this collection are the girl-led narratives that are so often at the center of girl-method and working with girls (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008). What did it mean for the authors to do research on girlhood when it was not possible to draw on the vast repertoire of girl-led methodologies (participatory visual methods and group discussions) that youth-focused researchers typically use? Clearly the challenges of being unable to work directly with girls and young women has been a central issue, with researchers turning to document analysis and telephone interviews, and using social media, reflexive writing, and other approaches to what we describe elsewhere as "ethnography at a distance" (Mitchell et al. 2022). Discussing fieldwork in rural KwaZulu-Natal that was part of the project "Networks for Change and Well-Being: Girl-Led 'From the Ground Up' Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and

South Africa,"[2] Relebohile Moletsane talks about the challenges posed to the ethics of doing research. She writes,

> With the arrival of COVID-19 in March 2020, and the lockdown restrictions that followed, the Networks for Change project had to suspend or postpone activities in the various research sites, including the piloting of the newly signed reporting and response protocol for addressing early and forced marriage in Loskop. Beyond complying with the COVID-19 regulations and restrictions, our view was that conditions in rural settings such as Loskop would not be conducive for research, neither would it have been ethical for us to expect our participants to continue engaging with us during lockdown, including remotely or digitally. With the onset of COVID-19, and unemployment, poverty and food insecurity at an all-time high, access to mobile phone data and the internet is almost impossible in rural communities. Thus, the much-touted alternative data generation methods are not available, particularly for participatory researchers. In essence, for us, using technology to conduct ethnography at a distance, particularly considering our participatory approach to research has not been possible. It would also be unethical for us to insist on continuing with our fieldwork in a context where issues of survival confront our participants and their families on a daily basis. We, therefore, decided to focus on the non-contact activities of the project . . . including ongoing analysis of the large data sets we have generated with the SIFs [Social Ills Fighters] since 2017. We continue to provide ongoing support to the SIFs and others in other Networks for Change sites via WhatsApp messaging. Recognizing that many people are dealing with multiple and compounding stressors during this time, we have made it very clear that the participants are in no way obliged to produce anything or respond to us in any way at this time. Through this intermittent communication, we have become aware of the challenges of accessing this technology by most of our participants, even though most, if not all of them have access to a cellphone. Unless we send them data remotely, for many, even responding to our WhatsApp messages is a challenge. (Mitchell et al. 2022: 304–5)

Crucially, the various chapters in *The Girl in the Pandemic* help to reshape what is being learned during this pandemic. Not unlike Moletsane's account above, these chapters remind us of what might be called the "why" or "under-what-circumstances" of research and some of the trade-offs when food insecurity and health-seeking behaviors must take precedence over fieldwork. They also highlight issues of risk and the possibility that mantras such as "do the least harm" in addressing ethical issues may have new meaning, where "doing most good" could become synonymous with collective care.

Finally, we come back to ideas of the passage of time and the challenge of writing in history, as it were. Perhaps it is crucial to keep in mind the broader question of what the significance is of a year or two (and more) in

the life of a young person. What, for example, is the short-term impact of being out of school? What is the long-term impact of knowing that because of an unwanted pregnancy, returning to school is unlikely to ever be an option? The young women who participated in Pugh et al.'s study in Ethiopia (Chapter 6), and who at the time of the telephone interviews had been away from their colleges for several months, held some expectation that the colleges would soon be reopening and that the pandemic was just an interruption in their schooling. But we later learned that the colleges were closed for a much longer period of time,[3] and we know, anecdotally, that at least at one of the colleges many young women did not return because they were pregnant, something that they could not have known, of course, when they participated in the telephone interviews conducted in June 2020. Of course, this might simply be framed as a case of life happening, but we see this as a clear call to treat these chapters as offering the opportunity to retheorize how we think about time, in the short term, and history over the long term. As Nidhi Kapur (Chapter 1) so aptly reminds us, we have a great deal to learn from studying epidemics and pandemics in history. The chapters in this book offer a picture of how COVID-19 was playing out in seven countries early in the pandemic and, in so doing, provide a foundation for what was to come in relation to the idea of living with COVID-19.

Acknowledgments

an irony in the fact that a book about the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of girls and young women should at the same time be slowed down by COVID-19. We are also grateful to our reviewers for their thorough and insightful comments on the manuscript. We know that one of the huge challenges to academic publishing during this pandemic has been the endeavor of keeping everything running, with the review process a crucial component of this.

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Notes

1. All unacknowledged quotations in this introduction come from the abstracts for the chapters that we had their authors provide.
2. This project, led by Claudia Mitchell (McGill University) and Relebohile Molesane (University of KwaZulu-Natal), was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (895-2013-3007) and the International Development Research Centre (107777-001).
3. Personal communication from Hannah Pugh, 19 August 2021.

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