

Editorial

by Sarah Youssef

1 According to the most recent gender report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) “disease outbreaks affect women and men differently, and pandemics make existing inequalities for women and girls and discrimination of other marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities and those in extreme poverty, worse” (*COVID-19: A Gender Lens*). The COVID-19 crisis has affected and continues to affect every aspect of our lives, raising anxieties, limiting spaces, and intensifying tension and conflict in different areas. In response to the current situation, *Gender Forum* dedicates a special issue to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on gender-related issues.

2 Corinne McSpedon and Mary Dillard’ article titled “‘This Is What You Signed Up for’: Oral Histories of New York State Nurses During the COVID-19 Pandemic” takes issue with the U.S. health care system. One of the first healthcare providers in New York City to die from COVID-19 was a nurse. When the city was already seeing hundreds of cases a day at area hospitals, particularly in neighborhoods already marginalized by health and economic disparities, nurses at one hospital in the Bronx staged a demonstration to protest the lack of essential personal protective equipment. The astounding response by hospital administrators was to threaten nurses that they would be fired if they continued to speak out regarding their concerns. Like many activists, healthcare providers took to social media to warn the public about the realities of both the COVID-19 crisis and the threats to the health and safety of their own families. However, in at least one Facebook thread, the response to nurses was, “This is what you signed up for.” In this remarkable article, based on numerous interviews, McSpedon and Dillard highlight what nurses in the New York metropolitan area, one of the epicenters of the pandemic, experienced during this staggering healthcare crisis.

3 Healthcare issues are also at the center of Gen Eickers’ article “COVID-19 and Trans Healthcare: Yes, Global Pandemics are (also) a Trans Rights Issue”. Trans healthcare has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic In multiple ways: Surgeries and other procedures have been cancelled or postponed, and mental health services have been paused or moved online. Moreover, trans people’s healthcare situations have turned out to be particularly vulnerable in this crisis because they have been precarious to begin with. This article argues that cancelling trans surgeries and procedures in the crisis is made possible through an understanding of trans healthcare as non-essential.

4 The arts are another area that has been severely hit by the pandemic. Lynn Deboeck focuses in her article on intimacy in artistic performances during COVID-19. Intimacy

Directors International was founded in 2016 as an organization that targets the artistic direction of intimate scenes (such as sex scenes or romantic scenes) in theatre, film and television. Partially prompted by the #Metoo movement, the intimacy direction effort is an acknowledgement of the sexual harassment and interpersonal discomfort that many performers (largely women) experience in the entertainment industry. The directing approach advocated by this group, and other newly formed groups with similar purposes, looks at intimate scene-work much like stage combat or stunt work, where the movements are choreographed in order to prevent harm. There are also frequent check-ins so that the actors feel allowed to voice any anxiety or desire to change or stop what is happening. With COVID-19 bringing performance (particularly live theatre performance) to a halt, the Intimacy Directors International organization, according to their website, officially dissolved as of March 15, 2020. While they note that their mission—to *initiate* the intimacy direction industry—has been accomplished, this article explores how the dissolution of such a supportive and large part of the movement might affect performance as it regains its place in society, particularly for those most negatively affected by the negligent and predatory practices that brought about the need for intimacy direction in the first place.

5 One of the most important steps to combat the pandemic was the directive to stay at home. Sanghmitra S Acharya, Mala Mukherjee and Chandrani Dutta’s article “‘Staying Home’ and Safety of Women During Lockdown – The Shadow Pandemic in India” sheds light on the particularly difficult situation of women during lockdown due to the increase of their workload and of their exposure to violence and a denial of vital outside sources of support. The ‘staying home’ rule involves a myriad of issues for women in relation to the respective social environment. Middle-class women tend to be left with the additional burden of taking care of family members and home-schooling children without the support of helpers who have been released during during lockdown. Women working in the informal sector are likely to be hit by a loss of their jobs, and as spouses of often equally jobless informal sector workers are perceived as ‘adding to the burden’ on the financial situation. Addressing the needs of women in times of lockdown is important as gender budgeting is widely known to impact positively on development planning.

6 This special issue of *gender forum* concludes with Robyn Dudic’s review of *Shakespeare and Queer Theory*. The 2019 published monograph by Melissa E. Sanchez is one of the most recent publications in the context of the ongoing critical debate about queer theory both within and beyond Shakespeare and Early Modern studies.