

COVID19 Pandemic and the Media: Gendering the Ordeal?

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Abstract

"Death touches the spring of our common humanity," and so has the covid-19 pandemic. There is hardly a country or a region that has been able to escape its vicious touch. Despite the unique, varying contexts that the pandemic has given rise to in different parts of the globe, the present scenario is also characterized by certain common features. One such significant observation towards which the global media is pointing is based on (binary) gender distinction. Since early April, the internet has been flooded with reports of how men are more prone to death due to covid-19 in comparison to women. The manner of media representation, my paper argues, is also a reinstatement of the male/female gender binary.

The paper analyses this particular drift in the media in conjunction with the postfeminist philosophy of thinkers such as Judith Butler and Tina Chanter whose works point towards a horizon where the accepted notions regarding gender binary and the materiality of the body do not hold. Besides, the paper also analyses how the media is accepting certain notions as 'given' and thus operating from a deep seated patriarchal premise that is inconceivable without the gender binary and gender roles.

Keywords: Media representation, sex-gender system, masculinity, post-structuralist (deconstructive) feminism.

During my post-graduation years at Jadavpur University, a visiting faculty from Delhi had once, much in manner of a discovery, expressed

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his surprise at what he felt was an obsession with Michel Foucault within the academia in Kolkata. No academic discussion, he remarked, seemed complete without at least a passing reference to this French genius. I cannot say that I had fully subscribed to his view. Presently, despite my reservation regarding the veracity of that claim, I cannot however help myself from feeling provoked to begin with an excerpt from Foucault's much celebrated work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. The third chapter of the book, emphatically titled 'Panopticism,' begins with a vivid description of the measures taken during a plague outbreak towards the end of the seventeenth century. Foucault writes:

First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death... the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant... On the appointed day, everyone is ordered to stay indoors: it is forbidden to leave on pain of death... If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting. Only the intendants, syndics and guards will move about the streets... It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment.¹

Foucault then engages in a fairly elaborate exploration of the notion of the Panopticon, which, in his words "is the general principle of a new 'political anatomy' whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty but the relations of discipline."² It seems difficult, if not impossible, to miss the almost uncanny resemblance that this strategy of exclusion and execution of a principle based on "relations of discipline" bears with the scenario that the present world has been thrust into. Strange it might seem to one that we now find ourselves forced into a situation that bears such resemblance with an elaboration undertaken by Foucault to arrive at his understanding of, in Althusserian terms, the Repressive State Apparatus.³ The underlying ramifications might call

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage, 1995), 195.

² *Ibid*, 208.

³ For an elaborate understanding of the concept 'Repressive State Apparatus', please refer to the essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New York:

for a full-fledged exploration, but, in relation to the scope of the present paper, it can be said that the inescapable reality is that today the entire world has been made to turn inwards and the Covid-19 pandemic has subjected the human species to hitherto unforeseen circumstances.

It is obvious that the medical threat of this novel corona virus is quite serious. Every day, news of scores of thousands of cases of new infection coupled with several thousands of unfortunate deaths is pouring in from all parts of the globe. This pandemic cannot, however, be considered to be the deadliest, even if we restrict ourselves to the recent history of epidemic outbreaks. Let us not bring into consideration the H1N1 virus triggered 1918 pandemic (Spanish Flu) that is said to have infected some 500 million people globally or one-third of the world's total population and claimed more than 50 million lives.⁴ In very recent past, the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak had a fatality rate of 11 per cent while that of MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) was 34 per cent.⁵ Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic with a death rate of less than 3 per cent (and that too is going down sharply with every passing day, considering the ever rising rate of recovery and declining number of critical cases worldwide),⁶ has unsettled us like never before. It has exposed a multitude of lacks and chasms in the existing world order. At a micro-level as well, it has thrown individuals and families into utter disarray. One might ask – why?

One observation accounting for this human perplexity can be the ease with which the virus has travelled beyond all conceivable forms of

Monthly Review Press, 2001). Or you may also refer to <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

⁴ "1918 Pandemic (H1N1 virus)",

<https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>. Accessed on 13 July 2020.

⁵ Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Borders of An Epidemic*, (Kolkata: Calcutta Research Group, 2020), 21.

⁶ According to the global figures as registered at WHO database on 21 July 2020 (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>). It is however impossible to find an exact figure of the Covid19 death rate at this stage because we are presently living in the pandemic.

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borders – cutting across societies, nations, class and race. The feeling of losing control over space, after all, has always proved unsettling for us. In the fictional piece “Avatars of the Tortoise” Jorge Luis Borges observes, albeit in a different context, that “there is a concept that corrupts and upsets all others. I refer not to Evil, whose limited realm is that of ethics; I refer to the infinite.”⁷ What becomes significant in the context is that our understanding of the world is always in reference to space that is finite. Borders and boundaries – space that is bounded – therefore become so pivotal at the operative level. The novel corona virus, on the other hand, has cut across all boundaries, triggering mayhem with the primal fear of loss of control at its core; a loss, because now we might need to confront an entirely new world order. This fear has only been compounded by the sense of yet another loss – the loss of sense of control over time. The pandemic, with its strict disciplinary measures of containment, isolation and quarantine, has enforced upon us what Jane I Guyer calls as ‘enforced presentism.’⁸ Forced to live in the immediate present, we are at a loss as it comes to our ability to plan ahead.

Whether we are conscious of it or remain in subtle oblivion, there is no denying that, though in varying degrees, we all inhabit a post-globalisation world. And, irrespective of how it sounds, the Covid-19 pandemic has also become truly global. As the time tested measures of containment and imposition of quarantine failed to restrict the infection, the locus of attention gradually shifted to other related aspects, such as the nature of the virus and how it works once inside the body; what are the preventive measures, if any at all; probable trends of spread of the viral outbreak; and so on. This is where the media and its often decisive role come into the fray.

We all know, even though only a few acknowledge at the level of the conscious, how great a role media plays in the shaping of our conscious, and by corollary, the unconscious. With the giant advances

⁷ J.L. Borges, *Labyrinths: Short Stories & Other Writings*, (New York: A New Direction Book, 1964), 202.

⁸ Jane I. Guyer, “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical and Punctuated Time”, *American Ethnologist* 34, 3(2007): 409 – 421.

in information technology and consequent boom in electronic media, this holds truer in today's time than any other period in human history. In regards the profound effect that media reports – stories and articles from several newspapers, magazines, news portals, electronic media – have on our being, media studies scholar Elfriede Fürsich observes:

Contemporary mass media operate as a normalising forum for the social construction of reality. They are important agents in the public process of constructing, contesting or maintaining the civic discourse on social cohesion, integration, tolerance and international understanding. Moreover, the media's power to steer attention to and from public issues often determines which problems will be tackled or ignored by society. Only those issues that gain publicity have the potential to make people think about social and political ramifications beyond their immediate experience and arouse political interest.⁹

In view of our discussion, Fürsich raises up several very significant points. First, there is the question of an implicit equation between media representation and the "social construction of reality." Borrowing from Stuart Hall, the intentional and constructionist approach of representation, thus, becomes functional vis-à-vis media representation. In the opening chapter titled "Representation, meaning and Language" of the book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*¹⁰ Hall describes these concepts at length. The intentional approach to representation holds that the speaker or the author "imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends them to mean."¹¹ There are however some shortcomings of this simplistic assumption. Language has its essence in communication, and the latter depends on what Hall refers as "shared linguistic conventions and shared codes."¹² It means that however private our use of language might be, it has to enter the play

⁹ Elfriede Fürsich, "Media and the representation of Others", *International Social Science Journal* 61, (2010): 113 - 130, 10.1111/j.1468-2451.2010.01751.x.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall(ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 13-74.

¹¹ Ibid, 25.

¹² Ibid.

of conventions and rules of language so that it makes any sense. This is where the constructionist approach comes to play. The constructionist approach “acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language... *we construct meaning, using representational systems...*”¹³

The media: newspapers, electronic news portals however, have a truth claim. To borrow again from Hall’s theorization of the systems of representation, such media present themselves with the claim of what is called the reflective approach to representation, where meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language [or *signs*] functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world.”¹⁴This appendage of the truth claim gives media the power to act as the “normalising forum” of which we have already seen Elfriede Fürsich mention. The second significant issue raised by Fürsich is closely connected to this seemingly reflective nature of media: “media’s power to steer attention to and from public issues.” To borrow from Alan Badiou, media thus holds the power of rendering something into event or non-event.¹⁵ In other words, media has a great sway over what we consider worth thinking, because they are only such issues that gain media publicity. In times of a pandemic, too, then, it is the media that plays a pivotal role in deciding our locus of attention.

III

We have witnessed during this on-going pandemic how, after one point of time, the attention of media – and, by corollary, our attention as well – shifted towards the analysis of the victim – who is more prone to getting infected, and who is at greater risk of fatality? And with this began what I see as a rather gendered journey of the media. As the American author and journalist Janet Paskin observes, “In strictly medical terms, the new

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hall(ed), *Representation*.

¹⁵ For more on this, please refer to Alan Badiou, *Being and Event*, (London: Continuum, 2006).

corona virus seems to hit men harder than women.”¹⁶ She states that in an analysis of around 45,000 victims in China, the death rate of men was 2.8 per cent in comparison to the 1.7 per cent death rate of women. The acclaimed media house, Deccan Herald, published an article on 26 June, 2020 that wondered at the revelation that “[m]ore men than women are dying of Covid-19. The numbers are striking. In Italy, men in their 50s died at four times the rate of women in their 50s. Globally, twice as many men than women may be dying of Covid-19.”¹⁷

Strange it might seem at a glance, but a sex-disaggregated study of the SARS-CoV-2 victims has so far kept showing similar trend – the virus *hitting* men harder than women. In England, for instance, the death rate of infected women is just 1.7 per cent, while the death rate among infected men is a whopping 12.4 per cent. We find an almost similar trend in Italy. With the overall death rate significantly higher than other affected countries, the death rate among women in Italy stands at 10.9 per cent while it is 17.7 per cent in case of men. Although the death rate is considerably lower among the American male, it is still significantly higher in comparison to the American women (men = 6 per cent; women = 4.8 per cent).¹⁸ Quite expectedly, this has also turned out to be one of the oft discussed issues in the media across the world at present. One objective of the present effort will be to arrive at an analysis of the media coverage of the “[g]ender Differences in Patients with COVID-19: Focus on Severity and Mortality”¹⁹, this being the title of one among scores of research articles published on the electronic media in the last few months.

¹⁶ Janet Paskin, “Women Are Bearing the Brunt of Coronavirus Disruption”. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-11/coronavirus-will-make-gender-inequality-worse>. Accessed on 8 July 2020.

¹⁷<https://www.deccanherald.com/science-and-environment/what-s-really-behind-the-gender-gap-in-covid-19-deaths-853848.html>. Accessed on 14 July, 2020.

¹⁸ All data retrieved from - <https://globalhealth5050.org/covid19/sex-disaggregated-data-tracker/>. Accessed on 14 July 2020.

¹⁹ “Gender Differences in Patients with COVID-19: Focus on Severity and Mortality.” <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00152/full>. Accessed on 12 July 2020.

Since we are dealing a lot with numbers and data, a note in form of a disclaimer should be added at this point. The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over. We all are presently living *in* the pandemic. Any assumption or analysis based strictly on statistical data available today might prove to be at serious fault in a month's time, considering the fact that such figures are changing at quite brisk a pace. Even then, it can be conjectured that what is being viewed as a 'gender difference' has been noticed globally by the media in terms of the rate of infection and consequent rate of fatality due to the novel corona virus (SARS-CoV-2). Let us have a brief look at few other related media representations.

"Why Covid-19 is different for men and women" is the title of a research based article published on 13 April, 2020 by the globally acclaimed media house of BBC.²⁰ As the (apparently) innocuous title suggests, this article tries to explore the question— "[f]or a virus that infects people indiscriminately, why does gender have such an effect?" The article begins by accepting the fact that "[t]he coronavirus is, after all, a more-or-less inanimate piece of floating genetic material. It is not capable of active discrimination." Yet, as it states, there is a palpable difference in the manner in which men and women are getting affected by the virus. Penned by the noted science and health journalist Martha Henriques, this article brings up the theories doing rounds in the contemporary media curious to *discover* the reason behind such gender difference. As she writes, quoting Philip Goulder, professor of immunology at the University of Oxford:

The immune response throughout life to vaccines and infections is typically more aggressive and more effective in females compared to males... In particular, the protein by which viruses such as corona virus are sensed is encoded on the X chromosome. As a result, this protein is expressed at twice the dose on many immune cells in females compared to males, and the immune response to coronavirus is therefore amplified in females.²¹

²⁰ Martha Henriques, "Why Covid-19 is different for men and women". <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-wome>. Accessed on 12 July 2020.

²¹ Cited in Martha Henriques, 2020.

In other words, it is because of the presence of two X chromosomes (in contrast to the single X chromosome in biological males), i.e. a strictly

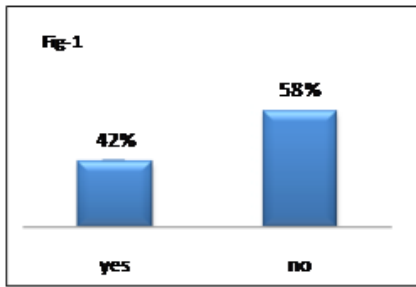


Fig. 1 shows the awareness among the respondents about trafficking. 42% said they know and understand the concept of trafficking and what measures should be taken. 58% do not know about trafficking.

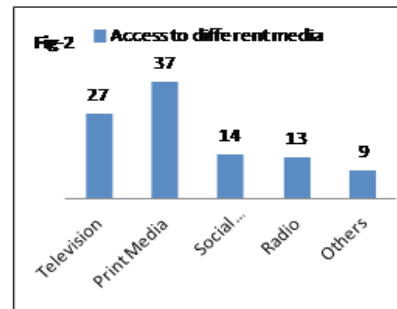


Fig. 2 shows awareness on trafficking / regarding legal policies.

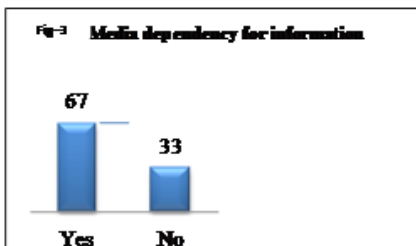


Fig. 3 represents the reliability of the respondents on the contents in different legal policies. 54% agreed that they rely on legal policies and 43% denied while 3% remained neutral.

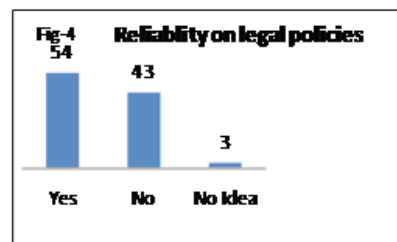


Fig. 4 represents the respondents' opinion on the reliability of the contents provided by different kind of media. 54% agreed that they rely on the media contents and 43% denied while 3% remained neutral.

biological reason, that the immune response to the novel corona virus is stronger in women than men.

Another article by Roni Caryn Robin, published in the digital platform of the "The New York Times" as early as 20 February, 2020, also seems to reiterate Professor Philip Goulder's observation, though with a comparatively lesser tone of certainty.²² This article also brings forth the 'role' played by the X chromosome in immunity. Besides, it mentions the possible role played by estrogen, considered the female sex hormone, as well as the hypothesis "that women's stronger immune systems confer a survival advantage to their offspring, who imbibe antibodies from mothers' breast milk that help ward off disease while the infants' immune systems are still developing."²³ In the manner, this article, apart from the chromosomal factor, also puts on table the possible role played by hormonal difference. References like these abound in the media across the globe at present.

In case of media reports regarding COVID mortality in India, however, there is an opposite observation. The month of June, 2020 saw several media houses reporting that women in India are at a greater risk of death due to SARS-CoV-2 virus. An article dated 22 June, 2020 by Soutik Biswas, the India correspondent of BBC, admits that "something puzzling is happening in India" because "although men make up the majority of infections, women face a higher risk of dying from the coronavirus than men."²⁴ This seems to upset the entire theory in global media regarding the female body and its naturally "sturdier immune defences", backed by the rationale of the X-chromosome and 'female hormone' oestrogen. The same article, however, also brings into consideration the fact that "women outlive men in India and there are more older women than men" in the country.²⁵ By bringing the latter

²² Roni Caryn Rabin, "Why The Coronavirus Seems to Hit Men Harder than Women". <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/health/coronavirus-men-women.html>, Accessed on 8 July 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53104634>. Accessed on 22 July, 2020

²⁵ Ibid.

into play, higher death rate among Indian women, thus, can be kept from upsetting the theory of gender divide.

It is not that the media is referring exclusively to an equation between the SARS-Cov-2 related morbidity and an almost innate anatomical constitution of the male and female bodies, because it is the same media that also calls into consideration other aspects such as social conditioning of the male and female in the society and its relation to infection and fatality. This, however, is done not without, at first, putting forth the apparently irrefutable theory wherein chromosomes, hormones – the *innate* nature of the female body – are called into play. From the perspective of contemporary gender studies, such representations by the media bring to fore several significant entry points.

At this juncture I would like to recall how the noted English biologist Havelock Ellis analysed sex differences. As philosopher Shefali Moitra observes in her seminal work *Feminist Thought: Androcentrism, Communication and Objectivity*, Ellis categorized sex-linked differences at three levels:

Primary differences characterized by differences in sex organs. Secondary differences characterized by differences associated with reproductive function, e.g., breast, body hair, etc. Tertiary differences characterized by differences in behaviour, e.g., aggression, care, assertion, submission. These traits qualify males and females differently; moreover, they are not directly linked to reproduction.²⁶

Ellis was, in fact, not unique in laying out a schematisation of sex-linked differences between man and woman. The Darwinian evolutionary process bears intrinsic relation with sex-linked differences. The Darwinian model actually inspires Ellis in schematising the evolutionary process from ape to child to woman to man. This also gives an explanation for the assumed immaturity or naivety of woman in relation to man. We know how Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), hailed as the father of psychoanalysis, has wielded profound influence upon

²⁶ Shefali Moitra, *Feminist Thought: Androcentrism, Communication, and Objectivity*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2006), 6.

contemporary world of thought. He too chose to draw a three-level sex-linked difference: (i) biological, (ii) social, and (iii) psychological.²⁷

It can thus be observed that it is rather customary on part of biologists to work with a model of three-tiered sex-linked differences between man and woman—primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary sets of difference take chromosomes as the marker. We have already discussed the media representation of the assumed equation between chromosomes and response to SARS-CoV-2 virus. Hormones form the basis of the secondary levels of differences. The point here is that there is no qualitative difference between the hormones present in a male body and a female body. Moreover, the quantitative secretion of hormones is not same in all males. The same applies for females as well. It can thus be safely conjectured that the secondary characteristics cut well across the binary male/female divide and varies from one individual to another. At this point, it would be noteworthy to have a look at how the media has covered the aspect of hormones and their assumed relation with covid.

An article published in 'The New York Times' on 27 April reports of male patients being injected with estrogen with the assumption that estrogen (considered a 'female hormone' because it is usually present in higher quantity in a female body than a male body) might help the male body fight off the virus in a more effective manner.²⁸ Closer to home, the 'Indian Express' published an article on 25 July, 2020 bearing the title "Explained: Do Sex Hormones Help Women Fight COVID better? To find out, Trials on Men"²⁹ that too, as the self-revealing title suggests, talks of the potential role that such 'female hormones' can play in saving the lives of men. On this count, it does seem that the media is emphasizing on the principle of biological determinism; a retelling

²⁷ Ibid, 7.

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/health/coronavirus-estrogen-men.html>, Accessed on 16 July 2020.

²⁹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/do-sex-hormones-help-women-fight-covid-better-to-find-out-trials-on-men-6383735/>, Accessed on 25 July, 2020.

of the notorious Freudian claim of ‘anatomy is destiny.’³⁰ It can also be conjectured at this point that the media is also re-emphasizing on the male/female (heteronormative) binary upon which the patriarchal system of all societies is premised.

Getting back to Havelock Ellis’s tripartite classification of sex-linked differences, we can see that he considers the tertiary differences to be “characterized by differences in behaviour, e.g., aggression, care, assertion, submission.” We can say with much certainty that what Ellis considers as tertiary sex-linked differences overlap with, if not stand for, what is accepted as the category of gender. Freud’s idea of the tertiary ‘psychological’ differences, as noted earlier, too takes us to the same understanding. We thus reach at an abstraction – gender – that for long has remained a highly contentious issue in feminist philosophy. Commonly understood, gender is a cultural construct. Each culture forces upon its people certain prescriptive norms of what it deems as appropriate behaviours. For instance, in almost all cultures that we can think of, men are supposed to be active, aggressive and assertive, whereas women are supposed to dwell in the realm of passivity, care and nurture. There are also ample discussions on how gender not only denotes differences but a deep rooted discrimination (against women) as well.

Early feminist analyses of gender worked on the premise of gender as an exclusively social mandate. Sex-difference, being biological, was viewed as natural, whereas gender difference got to be referred as cultural difference. With the ushering in of the philosophical era of poststructuralism, however, the notion of gender, as well as the sex-gender equation, has undergone several significant changes in feminist thoughts. We will get back to how this equation has been problematized in contemporary feminist philosophy. Before that, it seems necessary to have a look at how the media has been analysing the question of gender and its role in the on-going pandemic.

³⁰Sigmund Freud, “On The Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love”, 1922. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a877/7e8b11b8a2969456a24b2c83d929beebd8d2.pdf>, Accessed on 10 July 2020.

An article published on 9 April, 2020 by 'The Conversation' was titled "Corona virus Reveals just how Deep Macho Stereotypes run through Society."³¹ This article too begins with an acceptance of the fact that "more men are dying from COVID-19 than women." However, after just a passing reference to the probability of "different immune response" systems in male and female body, the article devotes itself into quite comprehensive a study of how "lifestyle and behaviour" - schematised in form of gender norms - might be responsible for such difference. It has been observed that one of the important factors in COVID-19 related fatality is co-morbidity. The article mentions how such co-morbidities such as chronic lung disease, cardio-vascular disease, high blood pressure, etc. are more common in men than women, partly because "men are more likely to engage in risky behaviour such as smoking, drinking and drug-taking." In similar vein, issues of personal hygiene - such as frequent hand washing, carrying sanitizers are also labelled as feminine and hence taken less seriously by men. The gender norms necessitate men to socialise in groups. Prohibitory impositions such as lockdown and social distancing make it more difficult for men to cope with than women. This is bound to have a greater impact on their mental health.

The article also discusses how the imposition of lockdown also has a direct causal relationship with the sudden increase in cases of domestic (gender-based) violence. The alarming rise in incidents of gender-violence during the pandemic, so much so that the media has gone to the extent of labelling it as a "shadow pandemic,"³² calls for at least a brief discussion. This is related to the equation of masculinity and power. This issue has been analysed at length by thinkers engaged in masculinity studies such is Michael Kaufman. Kaufman is the founder of the White Ribbon Campaign (1991), a movement involving men and boys globally to put an end to violence on girls and women. Kaufman begins his essay "Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power" with

³¹ <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-reveals-just-how-deep-macho-stereotypes-run-through-society-134968>. Accessed on 8 July, 2020.

³² "Locked In", <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/covid-19-pandemic-women-violence-un-6522082/lite/>, Accessed on 25 July, 2020.

an exploration of this aspect of power vis-à-vis masculinities:

In a world dominated by men, the world of men is, by definition, a world of power. That power ... forms part of the core of religion, family, forms of play, and intellectual life ... much of what we associate with masculinity hinges on a man's capacity to exercise power and control... Though men hold power and reap the privileges that come with our sex, that power is tainted.³³

It is this 'tainted' power that Kaufman goes on to explore through this essay and show how men's experience of that power is often so very filled with contradictions. He shows how the notion of 'being male' is a strange yet inevitable combination of power and alienation. All socially accepted forms of masculinity demand strict detachment from certain emotions and feelings. This alienation ever more increases man's pursuit of power. The pursuit of power, again in its turn, firmly establishes the notion that to be powerful, which is tantamount to being 'masculine' enough, an ability to detach and dissociate oneself is of utmost importance. This play between power and alienation is also beautifully captured by Jeff Hearn in his book *The Gender of Oppression*.³⁴ He is of the opinion that whatever we consider as being 'masculine' is a combination of this power and alienation. Hearn also shows that men have not only to distance themselves in certain manners from women, even the notion of friendship has to be kept under check by a reduced empathy. Thus, like ideal inmates of the Panopticon, men, to be men enough, always have to maintain a self-surveillance. They have to transform themselves into self-policing subjects; the slightest deviation may mean being labelled as a 'failed' man. This self-surveillance actually turns out to be an important criterion for sustenance of the patriarchal society. Disciplinary measures like lockdown and containment have thus dealt men with a double blow: they have been robbed off their

³³ Michael Kaufman, "Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power", In Joseph A. Kuypers (ed.) *Men and Power*, (Halifax: Fernwood Books, 1999), 59-83. Another significant read in this regard is Kaufman's essay "The Seven P's of Men's Violence". <https://ecbiz194.inmotionhosting.com/~micha383/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Kaufman-7-Ps-of-Mens-Violence.pdf>.

³⁴ Jeff Hearn, *The Gender of Oppression*, (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1987).

habitual public space and, for many, their role of being providers for the family; besides, they have been thrust into the domestic sphere at a time that demands a reflection upon human fragility, mutuality and interdependence, none of which a man in patriarchy is tutored to be at comfort with. Consequently, they are left hovering at the risky borderline of becoming a 'failed man'. Threat towards their perceived notions of masculinities drives them to committing domestic violence in a strange attempt at proclamation of their masculinity. This tells us how the present pandemic, and the restrictive enclosure that we are dealing with in consequence, is just another instance that brings to surface the already existing "macho stereotypes," to borrow from the media report discussed earlier.

It might now seem to many that the media is trying to operate in, what we have earlier viewed as, the reflective mode of representation—presenting to us 'facts as they are.' Analysed from a poststructuralist feminist lens, however, it is difficult to miss the role that it is playing in accentuating the gender binary that eventually goes on to effect a discrimination against women. In all analyses of the manner in which the SARS-CoV-2 virus is affecting the male and female body, for instance, the body has been accepted as a priori. The media, including the various medical portals as discussed earlier, assume the body to be beyond all logic of interrogation. But, the problem arises when we need to acknowledge how not just gender but the very materiality of the body as well has also been opened up to several significant questions. I would like to briefly visit certain key conceptual premises as articulated by Judith Butler to see how the entire schematic representation by the media in these days of the pandemic gets problematized.

Regarding gender, Judith Butler pronounces that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."³⁵ This leads us to the observation of gender as an illusion instituted through the repeated

³⁵Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal* 40, 4 (1988), 519.

stylisation of the body. The same issue is addressed by Tina Chanter as well. She observes that conceiving the relation between sex and gender as contingent allows us to acknowledge the significance that the body plays in gender conception. It is after all the body of a girl that eventually goes on to identify her with the 'feminine' ideal. However, if we think of the relation between sex and gender as contingent, besides accepting the pressure of social norms, it allows for acknowledgement of "a certain amount of discrepancy between cultural norms and an individual's ability or desire to reject them."³⁶ What it tantamounts to is that if an individual keeps challenging the gender norms, the gender norms, in time, will start accommodating such challenges and, eventually, such challenges will be normalized. Judith Butler also elaborates on the same when she says:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.³⁷

In fact, in that same essay, Butler also goes on to enunciate how the phenomenological tradition of thought infers the body as not a natural predisposition but a historical idea. This she observes through her reading of Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception*.³⁸ This deconstructive reading of the body as not a natural predisposition finds a fuller expression in many of her later works. Regarding the apparent irrefutability of the materiality of the body, Judith Butler, for instance, notes:

[S]urely bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these "facts," one might skeptically proclaim, cannot be

³⁶ Tina Chanter, "Gender Aporias", *Signs* 25, 4(2000), 1239.

³⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

For more Merleau-Ponty's exploration of this idea, please refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

dismissed as mere construction. Surely there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences.³⁹

Butler, then, engages in the seemingly impossible task of questioning this materiality that apparently seems beyond any refutation. She goes to ask the probing question:

I want to ask how and why “materiality” has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction? . . . Is materiality a site or surface that is excluded from the process of construction, as that through which and on which construction works? Is this perhaps an enabling or constitutive exclusion, one without which construction cannot operate? What occupies this site of unconstructed materiality? And what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?⁴⁰

Butler, for sure, is negotiating troubled waters. To begin with, she gives her nod to the materiality of the body that “live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence.” She also agrees to “sexually differentiated parts, activities, capacities, hormonal and chromosomal differences...”⁴¹ But that might entail a concession of certain interpretations of those facts. If we may recall the media reports that we have brought into discussion earlier in this paper, several have premised their observations on the hypothetical schema of the assumed roles that so called male and female hormones are alleged to be playing in regards the SARS-CoV-2 virus. What she feels pivotal is not to deny the materiality but examine the “process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.”⁴² Taking recourse to Merleau-Ponty’s notion that the body is not just a historical idea, but a set of possibilities⁴³ as well, it may be

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 28.

⁴¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴² Ibid, 9.

⁴³ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”, 521.

conjectured that there is no predetermined inner essence that decides the perception of the body. In the rather emphatic words of Butler, “[o]ne is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well.”⁴⁴

In a way of concluding, then, it can be stated without any reservation that when the conceptual world has moved this far where not only the concept of gender, but the very materiality of the body has also adopted such pluralistic, heterogeneous, volatile fluidity, the repeated focus of contemporary media on the body premised upon a dated male/female binary is quite regressive that reeks of a prejudiced, heteronormative patriarchal framework.

⁴⁴ Ibid.