

# *Pandemic Resurrection: Making Gendered Citizenship Visible in a “Postfeminist” Era*

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*The pandemic resurrected gender as a central categorization of citizenship. COVID-19 reminds us that gender oppression continues in its traditional, materialist formulations to structure our economic, civic, and political lives. Postfeminism has diversified feminist discourses, and at times been used as a temporal claim – the “post” signifying the diminishing need for feminist theory or activism in light of advancements in gender equality. We use postfeminism in a genealogical and critical sense which encompasses the changes in feminisms and enunciates various contradictions that apply to generations of people. The conditions of COVID-19 prompt us to analyze what Stéphanie Genz aptly names boom and bust postfeminism. This analysis generates two implications for philosophers of education working in areas of gender and political identity.*

## **Resurrecting the Absence of Gender in Citizenship**

“COVID-19 is a teachable moment” (Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2021, p. 2). What is the pandemic teaching us? COVID-19 has revealed that gender is, more than ever, a salient category for imagining, enacting, and teaching citizenship. Yet at present, gender is a mostly invisible identity in citizenship and citizenship education discourses, research, and scholarship, particularly in the Global North, where the assumption is that the project of women’s liberation is a historical one, already accomplished. “Postfeminist discourses prompt the question: Does gender matter anymore?” (Greenhalgh-Spencer, 2016, p. 275). In citizenship and citizenship education discourses, the answer remains mostly negative.

Throughout history, citizenship has been gendered as masculine. Feminist philosophers and theorists have long problematized the public/private binary in conceptions of citizenship and politics (Elshtain, 1981). More recently, feminist scholars have debated the “postfeminist” era or sensibility (Gill, 2007, 2016; Genz & Brabon, 2009), marking a shift in both the emergence of intersectional formulations of citizenship and new “paradoxes and contradictions” in the status and representation of women (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019, p. 4). This article explores how the pandemic resurrected gender as a central categorization of citizenship. COVID-19 reminds us that gender oppression continues, zombie-like, in its traditional, materialist formulations, to structure our economic, civic, and political lives. Postfeminism has diversified feminist discourses, and at times been used as a temporal claim – the “post” signifying the diminishing need for feminist theory or activism in light of advancements in gender equality. We use postfeminism in a genealogical (Genz, 2021) and critical sense which encompasses the changes in feminisms and enunciates various contradictions that apply to generations of people. We use the category here to analyze what Genz (ibid.) aptly names boom and bust postfeminism. As we consider the changing historical conditions brought about by a

pandemic, what can postfeminism, in all its complexity, help us understand about gender and citizenship?

COVID-19 and its ongoing variants provide painful reminders of gender's persistence as a global category organizing dominance and oppression, one which significantly structures participation in public and civic life. Here we consider these conditions and how they shape education and schooling. Schooling relies, under normal conditions, on a majority-female labour force. Women's unpaid domestic labour during COVID-19, as well as women's over-representation among those economically impacted by pandemic closures and layoffs, can be used as a site of informal and formal curriculum, which can either help to reproduce or potentially transform our understanding of citizenship.

We sketch two implications for educational philosophy in light of this resurrection. Both implications explore ongoing tensions within gender and political identity. The first tension is between "the gendered perspective and the perspective that interrogates the construction of gendered experience" (Mayo & Stengel, 2010, p. 151). To generalize, the former perspective characterized the first decades of feminist scholarship in education, while recent work has focused on the latter, seeking to probe and dismantle gender binaries in their multiple educational forms. The pandemic's lesson for philosophers of education is that the gendered perspective, and the experiences of girls and women in particular, are still a vital aspect of critical scholarship in democratic and political theory focused on education. The second tension is in the domain of political citizenship, between the rise of cosmopolitan and global citizenship identities, on the one hand, and the significance of national, state, and local citizenship status, on the other. The analysis of global capitalism has emphasized the former and dimmed the latter, yet the pandemic reveals the tremendous power remaining in the nation-state as a vital space for practicing citizenship, which empowers marginalized gender identities.

### Postfeminisms and the Pandemic

To say that we are in a *postfeminist* era means many different things, including the idea that feminism itself is of diminishing importance and use (which, as we hope is clear, we thoroughly reject). To elaborate, postfeminism has multiple and contradictory uses, including 1) "a temporal or historical shift, signaling a time *after* second-wave feminism," 2) a new kind of feminism, and 3) a backlash *against* feminism (Gill, 2007; Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019, p. 5). As subcategories of postfeminism, popular and neoliberal feminism signify specific connections to consumer and media culture. *Popular* feminism refers to the practices and conditions publicly available and circulating in social media of the #MeToo era, "from organizing marches to hashtag activism to commodities ... A 'happy' feminism" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg 2019, p. 9). Personal choice is one major theme among some postfeminist sensibilities: it signifies the idea that women have expanding choices in the economic, social, and political realms. This uniting of "personal choice" with feminist liberation is the realm of *neoliberal* discourses of citizenship (Sant, 2019), in which feminism is individualized and understood through competitive market frames of human capital (ibid). Neoliberalism invites us to "lean in" (Sandberg, 2013) in order to access all the economic opportunities that feminisms of old helped expose for contemporary societies. Popular and neoliberal interpretations of feminism can often express a false sense of equity and equality for all genders. Postfeminist discourses, based in simplistic assessments of gender equality as already achieved, celebrate women's "choices" whereby both paid and unpaid labour are freely juggled in the spirit of "having it all." Genz (2021) synthesizes these subcategories of postfeminism as a "boom" postfeminism, consistent with ideas of "choice" and "freedom" in a healthy economy (p. 205). Boom postfeminism nearly wholly breaks with its first and second wave predecessors, whose analyses of gender exploitation are revealed to (still) speak to present conditions.

The present pandemic moment contrasts with the boom postfeminism of the 1990s and early 2000s, when feminism was considered to have won most of its major victories. Genz (2021) accordingly hails the idea of a *post-boom* postfeminism as "bust" postfeminism – in which the "choices" and "freedoms" of earlier feminist victories turn out to be based in economic contingency, privilege,

and (selective) opportunities for prosperity (p. 207). During the shift to teaching from home, the work done by women teachers was for the benefit of others, leaving them for their material labour and energies. As well, women as parents or primary caregivers enabled the great shift to home schooling that happened when societies shut down starting in 2020. Such exploitation is based on an injustice of capitalism whereby human capacity is used for the purposes and benefit of others (Young, 1990). Conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic remind us that the insights of critical feminists from 30 years ago remain all too relevant. Boom and bust postfeminisms give name to the current swings of conditions and opportunities for girls and women around the globe, as revealed by the pandemic.

### **Women at Home: Back to the Private Sphere**

The pandemic has not been gender neutral in its impacts. “Social inequities and power relationships that disadvantage and marginalize women” were “exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic” (Ganguli-Mitra & Fourie, 2020, p. 2). Women were more likely to work in sectors hit hardest by lockdowns, such as retail, hospitality, care, domestic, and education (European Commission, 2021; Brower, 2021). Women are “disproportionately employed in the informal economy and in jobs with fewer social protections” (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020, p. 2). In South Africa, two-thirds of the three million people who lost jobs were women (ibid). More than half of women labourers lost their jobs in Kenya (ibid). In the US, non-college-educated women suffered the highest drops in employment during the peaks of the crisis (Zamarro, Perez-Arce, & Prados, 2020). A March 2021 report documented that nearly half a million Canadian women lost their jobs during the first year of the pandemic and did not return to the paid workforce, increasing the percentage of women in long-term unemployment (Desjardins & Freestone, 2021).

The shift to work at home produced a renewal of traditional gender roles in child rearing and household management, and increased the rate of domestic abuse (Brower, 2021; Roesch, et al., 2020). The disparity between gendered earnings places less value on women’s paid employment within families. When work hours become more flexible, women’s “extra” time is usually focused on care work, while men devote their flexibility to work for their jobs (Noonan & Glass, 2012). To cope and carry on during the crisis, women, more than men, focused on altruism and sacrifice (Sicard, et al., 2021). These traditional gendered norms laid the groundwork for the increased burden on women as schools shifted to remote instruction.

Women’s unpaid labour very much enabled the shift from public to private schooling spaces. More than 168 million children in 14 countries endured closed schools, and schooling from home, between March 2020 and March 2021 (UNICEF, 2021). In the US, women are found to be much more likely than men to be the primary homecare and education providers (Zamarro, Perez-Arce, & Prados, 2020). Because of the additional responsibilities, mothers with children at home during the pandemic more often report worsening mental health than fathers (Power, 2020). Discourses around such labour and personal sacrifices seemingly celebrate women, their work, and the “choices” they make to heroically sacrifice themselves amidst a crisis (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020). Such discourses, aligned with boom postfeminism, are countered by the bust postfeminist aspects of the pandemic, as women’s labour and well-being were among the first things sacrificed for the good of the society.

Bust postfeminism, in light of the pandemic, also exposes the consequential interconnections between gender disparities and political engagement. COVID-19’s disproportional impacts on women gained media traction through the few women national leaders who at times had distinct responses to pandemic conditions. New Zealand Prime Minister Ardern’s empathic and effective pandemic response drew public attention to alleged differences in leadership style between male and female politicians (Friedman, 2020). Additionally, the pandemic’s gendered impacts applied to political representation more broadly, emphasizing low numbers of female political leaders in proportion to the overall population in most countries. This was an important moment of global insight regarding the status of women. The European Commission’s press release on Women’s Equality Day in 2021 notes

the substantial under-representation of women in decision-making bodies: “Of 115 national dedicated COVID-19 task forces in 87 countries, including 17 EU Member States, 85.2% were made up mainly of men, 11.4% comprised mainly women, and only 3.5% had gender parity” (European Commission, 2021, p. 37). Only 30% of health ministers in the EU were women at the time of the survey (*ibid.*). The absence of women in formal and informal political engagement makes it far less likely that policy and legislation will take into consideration the challenges, problems, and inequities faced by women and girls (Brooks & Saad, 2020).

COVID-19 makes salient women’s status as workers, domestic labourers, and caregivers, showing how varied demands shape the ability of women to be engaged citizens and political leaders. Around the globe, women have made economic, political, and personal sacrifices in response to the pandemic, the conditions of which have underscored the persistent gender imbalances in most legislatures, parliaments, executive branches, and public health departments. In light of these gendered pandemic lessons, what can educators do to help shift these conditions through education and, in particular, strengthening the power of women and girls in political and civic life? To answer this question, we first examine how girls and women are presently educated *for* and *about* citizenship in schooling (Arnot, 2006). We then conclude with suggestions regarding directions for the future, as boom and bust postfeminist analysis shows us the precarity of the status of girls and women in the political, economic, and social life of their societies.

### The Invisible Made Visible

It is not a new insight in citizenship and citizenship education research that the very category of “citizen” was long reserved for male persons of property (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Munday, 2009). In many nations, the category was further reserved for those racialized as White. Across centuries, social and political movements have struggled to expand the legal and social concept of citizenship to all persons. Despite successes, the citizenship ideal remains stubbornly resistant to transformation. Estellés and Fischman (2020) note that the notion of citizen is often based in the ideal of a disembodied Cartesian citizen, “an idealized active subject whose political behaviors are the direct effect of rational and deliberative processes” (p. 2). Disembodied citizenship reified the mind/body binary. In this concept, the body, inclusive of messy affect, is useless in rational and abstract thinking (Elshtain, 1981). In such pedagogy, citizenship identity “is the product of an emotionally neutral, consciously recognized, and non-contradictory system that provides a stable frame of behavior that can be taught by schools and learned directly by students” (Estellés & Fischman, 2020, p. 5). Erasure of the body carries with it the erasure of oppressions based on physicality. Citizenship normalization is based on consistent systemic, institutional, and individual placement of full citizenship status on a “white, middle-class, male standard” (Urrieta & Reidel, 2008, p. 91). Citizenship identification of this type also normalizes able-minded (Carlson, 2021) and able-bodied persons (Lid, 2015).

Through such frameworks, citizenship education has often, by default, been genderless and colour blind. Discourse analysis of global citizenship education finds this prototype at work, despite the formal inclusion of women, people of colour, and other groups (Estellés & Fischman, 2020). More recently, citizenship identities in curriculum and pedagogy have been productively analyzed as privileging both Whiteness and middle-class cultural norms; however, citizenship remains a genderless conversation (Bohan, 2017). In particular, research in US social studies education reveals that curriculum shows women mostly through timelines: the right to vote, or political “firsts” to elected offices (*ibid.*). This is partly due to classroom teachers’ discomfort in taking critical political stances (Torney-Purta, 2007), but is also a function of formal curriculum in an era of standardization. The alleged political neutrality of conceptions of genderless citizenship is also aligned with the present boom postfeminist sensibility, in which “women are ‘now empowered,’” and can thus celebrate their newfound freedom (Dosekun, 2015, p. 960).

Discrediting assumptions of boom postfeminism, the pandemic has provided a sense of how women’s choices are still economically and politically constrained around the world. Resurrections of

traditional gender roles and the consolidation of male political dominance during the pandemic exposes gendered patterns long at work in our economic, political, and educational lives (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020). Reformers in citizenship education curriculum and pedagogy can be much better attuned to and can educate towards gender equity, as we gain insights from the cycles of boom and bust postfeminism made more apparent in the pandemic. In the remainder of this paper, we focus on how philosophers of education can promote such reform through future inquiry. Our two recommendations engage important, irreducible tensions within the realm of citizenship education.

The first tension within feminist philosophy entails the status of women and girls globally, and the simultaneous efforts to dismantle gendered constructs, such as “girls” and “women.” Philosophy of education feminist scholarship highlights difference within feminisms and the importance of intersectional frameworks for understanding gender across social class, racial, ethnic, religious, and national identities (Greenhalgh-Spencer, 2016). Additionally, emerging gender studies scholarship explores the instability of and shifts in gender categorization, exemplifying its marginalizing and oppressing construction. COVID-19 reminds us that the work of liberating women and girls for agency in civic and political spaces involves a “both/and” approach to this paradox. Gender remains relevant in its binary forms, shaping the opportunities girls and women are afforded within political and civic spheres, and shaping the ways that teaching is regulated and legislated by mostly male elected officials. The gendered paradox of citizenship means we must inquire into how gender matters in political agency and opportunity, while exploring how non-binary gender categories as social constructs have political and civic consequences.

COVID-19 reveals a second tension relating to gender and citizenship, specifically between global, national, and more local civic and political spheres. Citizenship education theory and practice have, in the last half century, witnessed a needed expansion towards global discourses of belonging, participation, and agency, as neoliberalism has enabled or forced migrations, transnational identities, and global formations of political and civic organizing for social reform. A cosmopolitan global citizenship, suggesting a borderless world (for those with privilege), is contrasted with the new “pandemic citizenship” (Calzada, 2021, p. 1).

Feminist theorists have productively mined globalization’s possibilities for citizenship. For example, Arnot’s (2009) conception of a “global conscience collective,” a form of ethical solidarity within citizenship education, seems more relevant than ever. Arnot asks, “How will women’s experiences in a global civil society influence the shaping of global citizenship education?” (p. 118). The pandemic compels us to reframe this question as, “How will women’s experiences during the pandemic influence global citizenship frameworks, curricula, and pedagogy?” Arnot explicates “what it might mean to create such a global *collective conscience* from a gender perspective” (ibid., p. 122). She suggests critical engagement with four distinct themes which represent realities of global civil society: “1) gender inequality and diversity, 2) gender and global poverty reduction, 3) sexual and reproductive citizenships, and 4) gender violence, conflict and peace education” (ibid., p. 123). These themes are important for women globally, as they are formed from issues women face, and which are much more acutely felt by some groups of women, during the pandemic.

The tension here is that even as we celebrate transnational and global formations for gender liberation work and activism, the pandemic produces many reminders of the limits of transnational and international collaboration. The global response to COVID-19, ironically, forces us to recognize the powerful roles that remain with the nation-state, as well as more local forms of governance and policy-making. Any illusions that national borders no longer matter vanish under pandemic regulations. The radically distinct responses to the pandemic within state and local political boundaries, particularly in nations with strongly decentralized government structures, mark the importance of smaller borders, too. COVID-19 reminds us to take the specificity and regulatory effects of national, state, and local boundaries into account in a gendered consciousness of citizenship education and opportunity. National and local formations of gendered citizenship matter powerfully, even as our consciousness of globalized inequities are properly raised (Enslin, 2006). For globally disenfranchised women, national borders have never been invisible or permeable. For women inside the West, borders of gender, along with race, social class, and other marginalized identities, continue to matter through boom and bust

postfeminist cycles. Too often, global approaches to injustice and inequity “become the purview of western (often white), middle-class educators and students in North America” (Parisi & Thornton, 2012, p. 215) who become the producers of knowledge and teachers of “others” outside the West. To avoid such colonialism, Parisi and Thornton (ibid.) charge educators with a transnational feminist civic engagement that is intersectional, flowing across without privileging nation-state boundaries. Transnational feminist civic engagement also emphasizes that the “local and the global are not defined in terms of physical geography or territory but exist simultaneously and constitute one another” (ibid., p. 217).

The pandemic has put into sharp relief the boom and bust postfeminisms that shape the status of women and girls around the world and their corresponding opportunities to engage in political and civic life. COVID-19 reveals, in particular, a bust postfeminist realization: material exploitation of women and girls continues in all societies, and powerfully impacts how formal and informal political spheres include and are shaped by the voices of women and girls. Citizenship education must stop reproducing this status quo at the earliest levels of curriculum, instruction, and school culture, and help make visible – in order to reform – the workings of gender, and gender oppression, in civic and political spheres.

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