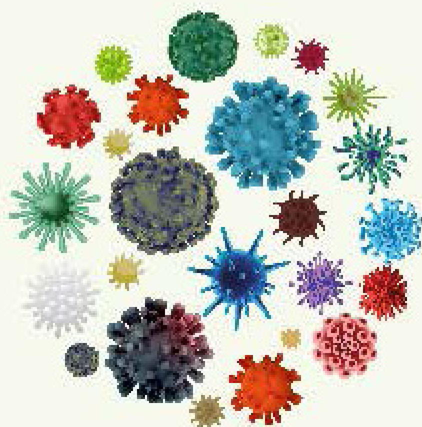
Pandemic Inequality

Civil Society Narratives from the Global South



Dejusticia
Series

PANDEMIC INEQUALITY

CIVIL SOCIETY NARRATIVES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Pandemic Inequality

Civil Society Narratives from the Global South

Jessica Corredor Villamil
and Meghan L. Morris
Editors

Dejusticia
Series

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Contents

Introduction 8

Chapter 1 Keeping the Lights on during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria 16
Adebayo Okeowo
(Nigeria)

Chapter 2 The Privilege of Quarantine in Chile 22
Jennifer Peralta
(Venezuela)

Chapter 3 No Coronavirus in Nigeria? 28
Precious Eriamiatoe
(Nigeria)

Chapter 4 Virtuality: A Double-Edged Sword in Times of COVID-19 34
Natalia Mendoza Servín
(Mexico)

Chapter 5 Invisible in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Dominican Republic 40
Ana María Belique
(Dominican Republic)

Chapter 6 Caught between COVID-19 and the Gallows: Mentally Ill Prisoners in Pakistan 48
Sana Farrukh
(Pakistan)

Chapter 7 Self-Determination: The Built-In Resiliency of Indigenous Communities 56
Mary Louise Dumas
(Philippines)

Chapter 8 COVID Mahamaari: Grassroots Experiences from Kerala, India 64
Neha Miriam Kurian
(India)

Chapter 9 The Unequal Pandemic 70
Cristián Sanhueza Cubillos
(Chile)

Contributors 78

BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Jessica Corredor Villamil and Meghan L. Morris

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, messages began surfacing in the media and social networks. “This is a chance to get to know yourself,” some argued, or “to do more exercise,” “to learn how to cook,” “to learn something new.” Our own colleagues argued that bookstores should be allowed to open during quarantine, since it was the perfect opportunity to use all this free time to read. We scrolled through these messages in exhaustion, often at the end of days when we felt like we had failed at absolutely everything that was important to us: work, parenting, activism, support for our communities and families. If we learned anything during these long months of lockdown, it was to juggle our time. As women, mothers of small children, researchers, and human rights defenders, for us the period of confinement was marked by a lack of time—to be a mother, to work for social justice, to continue research and advocacy work—and by a type of mental fatigue that quickly became the norm.

But this very form of exhaustion was itself a privilege. We had jobs, a roof over our heads, and food on the table for ourselves and our children. We are writing this introduction from the comfort of our homes, knowing that our paychecks will continue to come at the end of each month, and with the peace of mind to be able to stay home when the fear of contagion continues to be a reality for much of the population, especially those who must leave their homes to work in order to feed their families.

This security enjoyed by a small minority stands in stark contrast to the uncertainty being experienced by millions of people around the world. As has unfortunately become all too common, the effects of the pandemic have been felt more acutely by the most vulnerable: informal workers engaged in subsistence activities

who were suddenly left without a source of income, women compelled to quarantine with their abusers, migrants forced to walk back to their countries, populations living in poverty in places with weak health systems. The list goes on.

Some have called the virus the "great equalizer" for its purported ability to infect anyone in its path, irrespective of their wealth or social position. But in fact, the virus has laid bare the deep dividing lines in our societies, as the pandemic met existing and chronic forms of racial, economic, and social inequality, which rendered a vastly unequal distribution of suffering from both the virus itself and the various forms of social and economic devastation that came in its wake.

In Colombia, the hunger and despair stemming from the inability to scrape together a daily wage led to the "red flag movement," in which people who urgently needed assistance hung red cloths, scarves, towels, or T-shirts from their doors and windows. The movement, which emerged as a call for help and solidarity, quickly became a form of protest against the extreme poverty and inequality being experienced by millions of Colombians. It further exposed the vast insufficiency not only of state supports but also of our own forms of solidarity, as organizations providing relief and advocacy around structural inequalities only scratched the surface of the problem.

We saw similar patterns as we communicated with our partners and colleagues across the globe. The pandemic highlighted not only vast inequalities but also the limits of our existing forms of advocacy and solidarity.

About This Book

For the past seven years, Dejusticia has hosted small groups of advocates for our Global Action-Research Workshop for Young Human Rights Advocates from the Global South. The workshop works with these advocates to deepen their research and narrative writing skills, build South-South connections and collaborations, and increase the visibility of their work and writing. Each cohort of workshop participants contributes chapters to an edited volume and also publishes shorter narrative pieces on *Amphibious Accounts*, the blog associated with the workshop. Over time, workshop alumni have grown to number more than one hundred

incredible advocates, spanning the globe from Chile to Egypt to Nigeria to the Philippines.

Just as we were selecting our eighth cohort of workshop participants, we found ourselves in the middle of the pandemic. Due to the risks and restrictions on global travel and gatherings, we postponed the 2020 event. But it seemed that there was much that the workshop community could do from a distance to strengthen our existing collaborations, make visible the ways that workshop alumni were experiencing the pandemic in their personal and professional lives, and consider together both the challenges and the openings that the pandemic posed for our work. Most alumni work with organizations that have long conducted advocacy around the chronic inequalities that the pandemic has both highlighted and deepened. Rather than bringing these efforts to a halt, in many ways the pandemic rendered them all the more critical. At the same time, both these inequalities and this kind of advocacy work in the Global South are too infrequently in the spotlight. Part of the mission of the workshop—and this book—is to bring these stories to the fore.

This book aims to tell some of the many stories of the pandemic from the perspective of advocates from the Global South. Workshop alumni from around the globe began to build these stories in short form, publishing kernels of ideas and reflections on *Amphibious Accounts* as blogs. The authors then worked to expand these pieces into the chapters that make up this volume.

The book, as with all Global Workshop books, was a collective undertaking from the start. It exists first and foremost thanks to the inspiring and vulnerable writing of the workshop alumni who authored each chapter, during what was often an intensely difficult period for them, their organizations, and the communities they support. Our team at Dejusticia, especially Manuela Neu and Camila Soto, facilitated the publication of the blogs, and Claudia Luque facilitated the publication of the final book. Sebastián Villamizar and Morgan Stoffregen, who have supported the Global Workshop books since their inception, lent their excellent editorial and translation skills to the pieces. And the book, in the context of the Global Workshop project writ large, has enjoyed continuous support from the staff at Dejusticia, ongoing mentorship and collaboration from Nelson Fredy Padilla, and generous

financial support from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundation.

Pandemic Inequalities

When we circulated the initial call for blog submissions for this series, the theme was unrestricted, as long as pieces were related in some way to the pandemic. And yet as workshop alumni sent in their blog drafts, time and again their stories returned to inequality. Inequalities that long went unaddressed and that the pandemic had deepened, or laid bare, or muffled as it roared through the authors' communities and countries. Inequalities that had inspired creative social organizing, strategies of resilience that were at the ready when the pandemic hit. Inequalities that had broken people's trust in government, in the private sector, and in civil society organizations, leading many to believe that efforts by these sectors to manage the pandemic—or even the existence of the virus itself—were an opportunistic hoax.

How might we think about the pandemic through inequality, and inequality through the pandemic? How might such an analysis look when writing from Lahore or Abuja as compared to writing from London or San Francisco? How can it help us rethink our role as advocates and members of civil society, as well as our forms of solidarity? We hope that this book might shed light on these questions, from the grounded perspective of young advocates who have devoted their personal and professional energies to making change in the world.

Several of the chapters discuss the ways in which the pandemic has highlighted longstanding inequalities that, over time, have unfolded into broad public discontent and distrust. Precious Eriamiatoe writes about Nigerian citizens' lack of trust in their government, which has led some people to decry the virus as a government gimmick, and others to simply declare in the face of inadequate state provisions for the poor that "hunger kills faster than the virus." Jennifer Peralta discusses the daily demonstrations in Chile in early 2020 asking for a new constitution, and the ways that they were derailed by the pandemic, even as it brought into relief the social inequalities that had led to this movement. Cristián Sanhueza writes of his work with indigenous communities in Chile and the ways that the pandemic has pulled back the

curtain of stability, unveiling inequalities and uncertainties that in turn have defined capacities to manage the risk of death. Adebayo Okeowo poignantly writes of the electricity blackouts he experiences with his four-year-old son in Nigeria, bringing him back to the blackouts of his own youth, one manifestation of the poor governance he argues has led to deep distrust of the government's priorities in relation to the pandemic.

Other chapters foreground the resilience of communities who have experienced both chronic and acute disasters before. Neha Kurian writes of the local-level disaster management plans that were mandated in the state of Kerala, India, in the wake of a series of disastrous floods, and which were then available for local use as the pandemic unfolded. Louise Dumas writes from the Philippines, highlighting the importance of community-level decision-making for resilience, as well as the perils of advocacy strategies that undermine those capacities, even in an effort to manage the kinds of emergencies that have surfaced during the pandemic.

Advocates' struggles with their own roles in the pandemic are centered in other chapters as well, as advocacy strategies are strained by social distancing requirements and the inequalities between those who can work from home and those who have no choice but to take risks to provide for their families. Sana Farrukh confronts the challenges of representing a mentally ill death row client who cannot speak, as bans were placed on prison visitation and the client's scheduled hearing before the Supreme Court of Pakistan was postponed indefinitely due to the pandemic. Ana Belique discusses the tensions between protecting democracy in the Dominican Republic and protecting her own health, as well as the ways in which the pandemic has underscored the importance of strategies of solidarity as basic citizenship rights continue to be denied to Dominicans of Haitian descent. As some of these discussions look toward the ways in which we might rethink civil society's role in the face of the challenges of the pandemic, some authors caution that we must beware both of those who promise too much and of promising too much to ourselves. Natalia Mendoza writes of the sublime promises of technologies like Zoom to narrow social distance and the dark sides of signing away our privacy for the promise of connection.

The Role of Civil Society

The pandemic has the potential to fundamentally reorient how we live, work, and relate to one another. What new roles might these shifts imply for civil society, for how we organize, and for how we do advocacy? The contributors to this book, writing from different perspectives, invite us to consider what the pandemic has taught us about the role of collective mobilization and civil society in times of crisis, which might help us reorient our work toward the future.

Since the moment the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, grassroots movements and civil society organizations were often the ones on the frontlines of the health emergency response, ready to help vulnerable populations, conduct campaigns around the virus, sew face masks in places where they were scarce, and donate medical equipment. At the same time, many of our more traditional forms of collective action were limited by widespread distrust and instability, along with with the very forms of social distance that effective responses to the pandemic required. In this context, new forms of local-level and informal mobilization emerged to meet pressing needs through more spontaneous forms of solidarity crafted to meet the moment. These acts of solidarity have been significant, and in some cases have shaped new and creative forms of collective action.

This capacity for creativity and resilience demonstrated by communities has been critical for mitigating the pandemic's indirect effects. Such capacity was built through years of mobilization, frequently against the same inequalities that caused disparities in the distribution of suffering from the pandemic in the first place. But this experience also built strengths and strategies that communities were able to activate and adapt in response to the crisis. In the face of the failure of many national and local governments to provide an adequate response to the pandemic, particularly across all sectors of their populations, communities and grassroots organizations have devised solutions, frequently with very few resources other than their own local capacities, knowledge, relationships, and collective strengths.

If national and local governments had been adequately prepared, mobilized resources and information effectively, and

distributed them evenly, some of these efforts would not have been necessary. The existence of creative local mobilization does not clear the state of responsibility for doing everything it can to prepare for crisis and provide effective and equitable responses. But it does teach us that such responses would do well to build from the perspective of the most vulnerable, from civil society, and from other local groups mobilizing around particular issues. Doing so would not only build a more effective response but also revitalize democracy at the local level and create much-needed cohesion during times such as the present.

It is also important that diverse organizations come together. Just as the pandemic has highlighted interconnectivity—what affects you can affect me as well—it has also underscored the importance of collaboration amongst civil society and grassroots organizations, those working to strengthen civic space, and those fighting against inequality.

Thus, although COVID-19 has revealed structural inequalities and the failure of many states to effectively manage the crisis, it has also created an opening for civil society to evaluate and reorient its forms of action. At a time when the work of civil society organizations is being heavily questioned and attacked by governments and a range of other actors, now is the moment for civil society to reorient and affirm its role in society.

These chapters are a testament to the chronic struggles against the structural inequalities that are present everywhere, from our local neighborhoods to our global community. At the same time, they speak to the critical importance of creatively reorienting our forms of collective action and solidarity toward the future.

BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
Keeping the Lights on during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

Adebayo Okeowo
(Nigeria)

Shortly after I started writing this, it began to rain, and within a few seconds, the power was out. This is not unusual, even though it never ceases to amaze me. In the part of Nigeria where I live, whenever it is about to rain, we start bracing for the lights to go out and we do not expect power to be restored until after the rain has stopped and—as we usually tease—until the electricity cables are dry.[1] So right now, the quiet night is pierced with the sound of raindrops hitting rooftops and the noise of generators supplying electricity to homes. This is usually how it happens: whenever the light comes back on, my four-year old son gleefully screams, "Light is back!" Seeing him excitedly jump takes me back to my own childhood, when we used to yell "Up NEPA" whenever light was restored. NEPA at the time stood for National Electric Power Authority. It is now called Power Holding Company of Nigeria—and the name change has proven a bit problematic because many have complained about the company taking its name too seriously by literally "holding" onto power instead of distributing it to homes and establishments.

Back in my days as a kid, whenever we were returning home, we looked—with bated breath—to see if our neighbors' light bulbs were on, because that was an indication that our house would have electricity too. We were immediately disappointed whenever we didn't spot that orange glow beaming from the balcony or fence of a neighbor's house. It was still a bit disappointing even

1 One of the reasons for power outages during inclement weather in Nigeria is due to the country's outdated infrastructure; so, in order to prevent further damage to the already overburdened system, the operator cuts power supply during a rainfall ("3 Reasons for Power Outages on Rainy Days" 2019).

when we heard the sound of generators because apart from the noise pollution, it also meant that we could have electricity only for a couple of hours since we would have to turn off the generator before bedtime. So it's really quite sad that decades later, not much has changed and my son still has to experience the effects of poor governance that have existed since my childhood days.

The electricity problem is a fraction of the many other problems that have plagued Nigeria for so many years. Nigerians have been forced to become their own government—digging wells and boreholes to supply water, buying generators to guarantee constant power supply,[2] hiring manpower to fix bad roads, organizing vigilantes to control crime, and the list goes on. Against this backdrop, having a pandemic added to the burden was the last thing we needed. But it happened nevertheless, and in February, the Federal Ministry of Health confirmed Nigeria's index case of COVID-19: an Italian man who had traveled back into the country from Milan ("Coronavirus: Nigeria Confirms First Case in Sub-Saharan Africa" 2020). So, there we were, confronted with a health crisis that had crippled giant economies, overwhelmed the world's best health care systems, and practically brought everyone to a standstill. But there was hope that in the same manner that Nigeria contained the Ebola virus of 2014, we would also shut down the coronavirus in a heartbeat (Campbell 2020; Ikhuoria 2014). However, COVID-19 has proven to be devastatingly different from Ebola and has exacerbated preexisting problems.

But one of the problems you do not want to be grappling with alongside a health crisis of this magnitude is an erratic power supply. The electricity situation in Nigeria is so severe that in 2019 alone, the national grid collapsed more than ten times, resulting in nationwide blackouts (Wahab 2019). It is so preposterous that it is almost unbelievable, but, sadly, it is true. It is also true that pre-COVID-19, hospitals were known to embark on surgeries using torch lights and lamps; and it is true that some of the big public hospitals have had extended periods of blackouts that have hampered their ability to deliver quality health care (Adeshokan

2 According to a report by the Access to Energy Institute (2019), Nigeria has more than twenty-two million small gasoline generators, whose capacity is eight times larger than the national power grid.

2020; Onyenucheya 2019). The epileptic power supply therefore becomes a point of concern as we wade through this pandemic. Hospitals and health centers, now more than ever, require constant power supply to attend to patients.

Households also need constant power supply, particularly now with the lockdown restrictions imposed by the government in order to control the spread of the virus. But instead of improving power supply, the Nigerian government, after lifting the lockdown restrictions, introduced a 50% hike in electricity tariffs, even as citizens are still trying to cope with the economic squeeze induced by the pandemic ("Halt the Electricity Tariff Increase" 2020). And just in case the poor masses decided to resort to their already overworked backup generators for their electricity supply, the government made sure that the cost of fuel was also increased by 15% (Davies 2020). The combination of these two moves by the government during an extremely difficult time speaks volumes about how little the government cares about the hardships of its citizens. For instance, this is the same government that allocated 9 billion naira for the renovation of the National Assembly while the country was still reeling from the impact of COVID-19 (Erezi 2020). If this does not fit the description of "misplaced priorities," nothing else will. That money could have been put to better use if it had been allocated to upgrading the health care system, helping small businesses stay afloat through the pandemic, or even delivering stable electricity so that Nigerians do not have to spend a whopping US$12 billion annually to generate their own power (Osae-Brown and Olurounbi 2019).

The effects of the lack of stable electricity are far-reaching, extending beyond health care and into the realm of access to education. For example, while some more affluent families have been able to connect their children to online classes during the COVID-19 lockdown, children in rural areas are unlikely to have the means to afford such luxury, especially because only 36% of those in rural areas are connected to the electricity grid.[3]

3 According to USAID-led project Power Africa, only 45% of Nigerians (36% of rural residents and 55% of urban residents) are connected to the formal power supply (USAID 2020).

If there is anything that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, it is that leaders do not suddenly become more compassionate or capable during a crisis. The reality is that while some countries are learning from the pandemic and starting to thrive again, others are just surviving. It is worrying that the Nigerian government has not converted this moment of a global emergency into an opportunity to fix the dysfunction that has been baked into many aspects of the Nigerian system. We still have months and maybe even years ahead of fighting off the coronavirus, and we cannot afford for the status quo to remain.

Well, the rain has stopped now, and power has been restored. The noise of generators has given way to the silence of the night. Seems like a perfect time to renew hope again.

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BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 2
The Privilege of Quarantine in Chile

Jennifer Peralta
(Venezuela)

As a Venezuelan, one of my reasons for moving to Chile in 2017 was the country's economic stability and the possibilities that it might open up for me. However, a few months after arriving, I began to understand that the economic development that had initially drawn me in did not commune with the human rights guarantees needed for one to live in dignity. It took just over two years for what I had been witnessing as an immigrant and a human rights activist to become even more visible by means of a social phenomenon that marked a before and after in Chile's democratic history.

In October 2019, a thirty-peso fare hike for the capital's subway system sparked a wave of protests. At first, it was mainly students who mobilized against the fare increase in Santiago—but little by little, the unrest spread to other sectors, regions, and age groups. Things spiraled out of control on October 18, when citizens took to the streets to protest and riot, bearing signs and painting graffiti with the slogan "It's not 30 pesos, it's 30 years." This slogan referred to the period during which citizens have suffered a series of injustices that, shielded by the Constitution, have kept them from enjoying their basic rights. Education, health, social security, and adequate housing were some of the recurring themes that could be seen on signs and walls and heard in chants during the marches.

Through these daily protests, citizens successfully pressured the government to agree to a referendum on April 26, 2020, that would allow the country to vote on whether to adopt a new Constitution. The new Constitution would recognize rights such as the rights to health, education, and social security. But this social outburst was put on hold by a heavier force: the COVID-19

pandemic. The World Health Organization (2020) declared a public health emergency as a result of COVID-19.

With the pandemic, the social crisis that had erupted in October 2019 became even more acute. The situation began to grow more complex. Given that large gatherings of people increase the risk of spreading the virus, citizens could no longer organize mass protests. Moreover, at the end of March, the government announced that it would postpone the national referendum until October 25 (Servicio Electoral de Chile 2020).

What has happened to the social unrest? Although the health crisis has put large-scale protests on hold, it has also further exposed the inequalities and injustices that initially sparked the social turmoil. One clear example is the fact that quarantining—a strategy used around the world to stem the spread of the virus—is not something that all citizens can do. Telecommuting is a privilege for some, while for others it is an impossible feat that means being left without a source of income. According to a survey conducted in March 2020 by the University of Chile, more than 70% of workers from households earning less than 600,000 pesos (about US$700) a month continued to leave their homes to work, while more than 73% of those from households earning 1.5 million pesos (about US$1,800) a month were telecommuting (Universidad de Chile 2020). To put it in perspective: Chile's minimum wage is about 320,000 pesos (US$380) a month, which is perhaps just enough to pay rent. In addition, according to the National Statistics Institute, in 2018, 50% of Chilean workers were earning a monthly wage of 400,000 pesos or less (Bío Bío Chile 2019). Moreover, the health crisis triggered a rise in unemployment, which in the first quarter of 2020 was 8.2% and itself represented a 1% increase compared to the same period in 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2020).

Falling ill in a country like Chile is stressful because the quality of health care and access to medicines depends on one's socioeconomic position. Regardless of the government's measures in response to COVID-19, the Chilean Constitution does not explicitly state that health is a right, instead noting that individuals have the right to choose their health system, whether public or private. But those of us who live here know that the private system is the one that offers quality care and that this system is also segmented according to income.

The situation is similar for the right to social security. The Constitution does not clearly confer the status of a right on social security, instead leaving private actors in charge of administering the savings plans that become citizens' pensions upon retirement.

It is a well-known fact that pension fund managers reaped more than 400 million pesos in profits during the first nine months of 2019, while as of June 2019, the average pension was 290,070 pesos for men and 176,856 pesos for women ("AFP" 2019). No pension was more than the minimum wage, which at that time was 301,000 pesos a month. Additionally, according to a recent report on outstanding debt by the University of San Sebastián, between 2018 and 2019, the delinquency rate among individuals older than sixty increased by 11.4% ("Chilenos endeudados" 2020).

It is important to point out that due to the COVID-19 crisis, pension funds have suffered important losses ("AFP" 2020), which has negatively affected the savings of citizens who lack safeguards in this regard.

Various civil society organizations that work on behalf of vulnerable elderly individuals have been calling attention to this precarious state of affairs. Elderly persons also have a greater risk of contracting the virus and dying as a result.

Other things also point to the fact that quarantining is a luxury of the few. Seventy-seven thousand households in Chile are overcrowded, which poses a serious risk of contagion (Ciper 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic sparked an increase in domestic violence. According to the Ministry of Women, there was a 70% increase in calls to the country's domestic violence hotline (The Clinic 2020). One hopes that if Chile adopts a new Constitution, it will enshrine women's right to be free from violence, their right to sexual and reproductive health, and parity in various areas of social life.

That said, guaranteeing human rights is more than just a question of writing these rights into constitutions and laws. One case in point is Venezuela, whose Constitution reflects important progress in rights recognition but where, according to many activists, the current government is a criminal dictatorship. Nevertheless, it is critical that state structures establish a formal and robust groundwork (through constitutions and laws) for the right to a dignified life so that citizens have the tools to demand compliance

and so that governments have a guide for how to uphold this right. Any country that considers itself a democracy must urgently address these issues.

In Chile, protests have gradually started up again (Paúl 2020). I don't know how long the pandemic will be able to contain the social unrest that continues to swell. But my wish for Chile is the same as my wish for my own country, Venezuela: dignity. A democracy with social equality, with rights guarantees, where the plurality of thought is respected and embraced.

My wish for Chile is a new Constitution.

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BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 3
No Coronavirus in Nigeria?

Precious Eriamiatoe
(Nigeria)

"Madam, if I do not work, my family and I will die from hunger before the virus gets to us." These were the words of the taxi driver I met on a trip to the supermarket during the lockdown in Abuja, Nigeria.[1] While we conversed about the effect of the lockdown, I tried to explain the importance of the stay-at-home order for preventing the spread of the virus. It was at this point that he expressed his resolve to take the risk to put food on his table.

This conversation made me reflect on what the COVID-19 outbreak means for the average Nigerian, as well as the poor and most vulnerable, who will defy all odds in a desperate need for survival. More importantly, the conversation revealed how systemic corruption has not only fueled pervasive hunger and wealth inequality but also resulted in a lack of trust in the government. While Nigerians have grappled with corruption, poverty, and wealth inequality for a long time, almost to a point of resignation, a global pandemic exacerbates and brings these issues to the fore, provoking a critical reflection on why they must be addressed in a timely and effective manner. In this chapter, I reflect on how these longstanding challenges could adversely affect Nigeria's fight against the pandemic.

At the onset of the pandemic in Nigeria, I heard people in my community say that hunger kills faster than the virus. While there is no scientific evidence to buttress the veracity of this assertion, beneath it lies the reality of the poor and vulnerable—that in these

1 Although there was a total lockdown, the government allowed a daily four-hour window for movement for essential services such as food shopping.

uncertain times, as people try to stay safe from the virus, there is another virus from which they must protect themselves: hunger.

Nigeria is considered one of the richest countries in Africa and is currently the continent's largest economy, with a GDP of US$448 billion (World Bank 2019). At the same time, Nigeria hosts one of the world's largest poor populations, with 82.9 million people—or 40% of the country's population—living below the poverty line (National Bureau of Statistics 2020). According to a recent Oxfam report, the cumulative wealth of just five Nigerians could lift millions of Nigerians out of poverty and extreme hunger (Oxfam 2019). This wealth inequality is fueled by a very corrupt system: Nigeria has a corruption perception index of 26 out of 100 (where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean), ranking it 146 out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2019). Given these socioeconomic challenges, the economic impact of the pandemic would be expected to bite hard across all sectors of society, with the worst hit being the poor and vulnerable. To mitigate this potential impact of the pandemic, the government passed a stimulus package granting 3.6 million poor and vulnerable households a one-time cash transfer of 20,000 naira (US$52) each (Ereyi 2020). However, this measure is only a drop in the ocean considering the more than 80 million people living in poverty (National Bureau of Statistics 2020).

Another issue brought to the fore by the pandemic is the level of trust that citizens have in the government's ability to adequately respond to the crisis. This lack of trust follows many years of repeated failure to protect people's lives and property, as well as years of corruption and mismanaged resources. Already, the government has been criticized for not proactively taking measures to prevent the spread of the virus since the first case was reported on February 28, 2020. One of the consequences of this lack of trust is reflected in the attitude of some citizens toward the pandemic. Some believe that the virus does not exist, at least not in Nigeria. They believe that it is a government gimmick. Once, when I tried to purchase some fresh meat from a vendor in the local market close to where I live, I inquired as to why the vendor was selling meat without any mask or gloves. In a dismissive manner, and to my utmost surprise, he retorted that there is no coronavirus in Nigeria and that the government was just making it up to get

money. This experience revealed that in spite of the safety guidelines put in place by the government, the level of compliance may be hindered due to the perception that the virus doesn't exist. Although the government is investing in awareness-raising initiatives, the success of these efforts will be challenged by citizens' overall apathy and lack of trust in the government.

Perhaps citizens' attitude can hardly be criticized, for the government flouts its own guidelines. There have been reports of total disregard for social distancing rules by public officials, sparking concerns about how well the government is enforcing the guidelines (Egbunike and Ajayi 2020). This was exemplified by an experience I had in my neighborhood market shortly after the ease of the lockdown. As stipulated by the authorities, everyone is required to wear a mask in public places. Upon approaching the entrance to the market, I noticed that there was an argument between a government official and the gentleman stationed at the entrance to ensure compliance with the COVID-19 guidelines. I soon realized that the government official was insisting on being granted access to the market without wearing a mask. As they argued back and forth, a small crowd of people waiting to enter the market had gathered and watched in dismay. At this point, I stepped forward to address the official, reminding him that the authorities set the rules and should be exemplary in respecting them. Disappointed and embarrassed, he stepped away, allowing for others who were properly adorned to access the market. This experience also reveals the attitude of some public officials who believe that they are above the law. If authorities refuse to respect their own guidelines, they send a clear message to citizens not to take them seriously, either. In this sense, they contribute to the narrative that denies the existence of the virus.

In addition, the transparency with which the government is dealing with the pandemic has raised a lot of questions among citizens. For example, there have been calls to account for money donated by individuals and institutions to respond to the pandemic ("Nigeria: Accounting for COVID-19 Funds" 2020). Similarly, there are doubts as to the reliability of the figures provided by the government, particularly concerning whether they represent the true scale of the pandemic. While some believe that the figures are inflated for political reasons or as a means to obtain

more funds, others are of the view that the figures downplay the scale of the pandemic (Adepoju 2020). It should be noted that Nigeria has a poor data and information management system, which poses a setback in its response to the pandemic. The shadow of doubt on the accuracy of data and the transparency with which the government has led its response only exacerbates citizens' lack of trust, which in turn breeds indifference and denial about the existence of the pandemic, as well as disrespect for the guidelines.

Perhaps one of the most glaring issues that the pandemic brings to the fore is the corruption and decay in the country's health system. Corruption in Nigeria's health care system is manifested through bribery, kickbacks, underfunding, theft of medications, absenteeism, inadequate infrastructure, and poor working conditions (Anti-Corruption Evidence 2020; Tormusa and Idom 2016). While the poor and most vulnerable have borne the brunt of the decay in the health system, in an ironic twist during the current pandemic, authorities who have failed to ensure an effective and functioning health system are now compelled to rely on the same system for their own health care. Prior to the pandemic, it was common for government officials and the rich to seek medical assistance abroad. Now, however, doing so has become a luxury that even the rich and most powerful cannot afford, given the global travel restrictions. If there is anything the pandemic has taught us, it is the desperate and urgent need to fix the health sector.

Conclusion

Nigeria continues in its fight against COVIDs-19 amidst enduring challenges of corruption, lack of trust, poverty, inequality, and a weak health system. At a time when collective efforts and cooperation are required to win the battle against the coronavirus, these longstanding challenges could significantly undermine the Nigerian government's efforts to curb the spread of the virus and respond to thousands of confirmed cases. To succeed in its response, the government needs to win the trust of citizens. Trust is also the bedrock for addressing broader issues of corruption and inequality, which, in turn, can further increase citizens' trust in the government. The pandemic provides a good opportunity for the government to build this trust and demonstrate that it can

get things right. While we hope that the pandemic comes to an end as quickly as possible, the lessons it has taught us should spur us to address the deeper issues that have come to the fore. What is clear is that COVID-19 has exposed the glaring poverty, wealth inequality, corruption, and lack of trust in Nigeria, and the government must address these issues immediately in order to build a country that caters to the rich and poor alike, at all times.

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BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 4
Virtuality: A Double-Edged Sword in Times of COVID-19

Natalia Mendoza Servín
(Mexico)

I believe that we humans are simultaneously capable of the most sublime and the most atrocious acts. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed these two facets of the people inhabiting this world. In this chapter, I want to focus on how sublime and atrocious actions can be found in virtual settings, which have become part of our lives at a breathtaking speed.

I have personally witnessed many sublime acts during this time. For example, in light of mask shortages, many people are sewing and giving away homemade masks. Others are donating food to individuals who are out of work and suffering during the health crisis.

In my social networks, people have circulated beautiful images inspiring us to move forward despite the difficulties. Some images are funny or encouraging (long live Mexican ingenuity!) and others are profound, but they all share the same goal: to bring us together and give us strength. One of my favorites, which has become a meme, is the one that says "We will hug again" ("Volveremos a abrazarnos").

Virtuality has helped us greatly during this time. In my case, it has allowed me to keep attending my classes, to teach, and to remain in touch with family and friends. And there are many others like me, who have used it for similar purposes. Furthermore, economic activities must go on; many services must continue to be provided, which means that thousands of individuals must place themselves at risk. To give these workers peace of mind, abide by the government's health measures, and not slam the brakes on all economic activity, many Mexicans have opted to make use of virtual tools.

The sublime actions that I mentioned earlier have helped ease people's worries. Good deeds during the pandemic have reached

the economic, psychological, physical, and labor spheres, and even other human beings. But there is another side of the coin to these acts, and it is a side that we cannot ignore. For example, some people have attacked health workers with bleach out of fear that they are spreading the virus. In this chapter, I want to address one type of atrocious action that violates the human rights to privacy and protection of personal data, an issue that I have researched for a long time.

The problem began when unscrupulous individuals managed to turn virtuality into something atrocious and destructive by violating a fundamental right: the right to intimacy and privacy. Many people in Mexico have used videoconferencing services such as Zoom, Google Meet, Telmex, and Facebook Time. During the pandemic, these services have been used widely for working and for maintaining personal relationships. Here, I will refer to the case of Zoom because it has been relevant in Mexico for failing to respect users' privacy. This is not to say that the other applications are wholly trustworthy, but at least there have not been any documented scandals.

If you visit Zoom's home page, you will see a line of text referring to the pandemic: "We have developed resources to help you through this challenging time. Click here to learn more".

If you click on the link,[1] Zoom explains that its platform can help us in the following areas: (i) remote working; (ii) education; (iii) hosting virtual events; and (iv) telehealth. In theory, Zoom is offering us a sublime tool: we can do everything, even attend a medical appointment without jeopardizing our own or the doctor's health!

All of these wonderful things for free? Well, no. This platform not only betrays its users' trust but also underscores the atrocious side of humanity. This kindness came with a high price, which was that Zoom exposed our personal information on the dark web. According to *Proceso* magazine, cyber security company Cyble found that more than 500,000 credentials for Zoom accounts were being offered for sale on the dark web (Portaltic 2020).

When we have Zoom calls, we talk about our private lives, our work, and our health. We share information that can be extremely

1 Available at https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html.

sensitive and even lead to discrimination. For example, imagine that someone were using to Zoom to vent about having COVID-19. Making such information public means that the person might be attacked with bleach, just like the health workers mentioned above. All of this information is put within reach of nefarious individuals with unknown motives who, for a small price, can obtain information that we never authorized sharing with third parties.

Zoom may claim that it didn't deceive us, that the hackers are the nefarious ones, and that the company is part of the sublime group that wants to help. However, according to privacy laws, at least those in Mexico, those who hold confidential information are obligated to protect it. Failing to comply with this standard is not only dishonest—it is also atrocious!

What can we do? To start, speak out. Assert our right to privacy and demand that Mexican authorities deliver justice for the abuses and violations committed by those who take advantage of a delicate situation and wedge a "sublime" Trojan horse into our lives. Second, we should try to use respectable platforms that are genuinely committed to data protection.

In this regard, it would be worthwhile for Mexico to consider building a digital platform that can be used during the pandemic without endangering the privacy of its people. However, in today's context, both ordinary citizens and Mexican authorities have opted to rely on preexisting platforms such as Zoom.

The law—even though many would disagree, and with good reason—can be a sublime tool for neutralizing atrocious acts. The virtuality that emerged during this pandemic as sublime and that soon became atrocious can return to its virtuous circle if we make use of legal tools such as data protection, which allow us to fight against those who have degraded the virtual space that has largely benefitted us during this critical time.

Finally, it is important to note that Zoom's violation of privacy highlights some areas for reflection with regard to underlying problems concerning the right to privacy and the protection of personal data.

The first area is the need to instill a culture of data protection among Mexicans. Although Zoom, by all rights, should not violate the data protection law to begin with, I think that those of

us who use digital platforms could opt for a service that better respects our privacy, such as Signal. Second, Mexican authorities need to ensure that national and foreign videoconferencing companies comply with the country's privacy laws, so that citizens are not left to manage the entire burden. And lastly, it is especially critical to foment a culture of speaking out. Those who violate the law should be punished, and I think that we citizens must be committed to this principle. By denouncing violations, we can return to all of life's sublime spaces, including the virtual ones.

If we can transform these considerations into reality, we can give rise to sublime actions to help restore, repair, and strengthen other ones that were born sublime but that, for a variety of reasons, became atrocious. In this regard, I believe that civil society has a fundamental role to play in the creation and transformation of sublime acts. For this reason, we need to work together toward sublime acts that allow us to cope with any type of crisis, such as the one we're living through now.

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CHAPTER 5
Invisible in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Dominican Republic

Ana María Belique
(Dominican Republic)

In February 2020, for the first time ever in my country, the Dominican Republic, the government postponed nationwide municipal elections. At 11:11 a.m., the president of the Central Electoral Board announced that the elections were being suspended due to problems with the electronic voting machines. It was the first time that the country had used such a voting system, and many had critiqued its effectiveness even before it was rolled out. The suspension led various political groups to allege that there had been attempts at electoral fraud. After the government's announcement, a group of youth activists demanded answers as to why the elections had been suspended and called for those responsible to be held accountable. The "protestors of the Plaza de la Bandera," as they were known, took to the streets each day, dressed in black, to stand in front of the Central Electoral Board and demand free and transparent elections.

On March 15, citizens returned to the polls to complete the thwarted process from February. Many of us went to vote at a moment when the country had just registered its first imported COVID-19 cases. We knew the risks posed by the virus; but we headed to the polls wearing face masks in the midst of a national cry for democracy and constitutionality.

Until that point, I think that many of us neglected to appreciate the dimension that the pandemic would take for our country. At that time, most people did not take prevention efforts very seriously, nor were there any registered cases in our town. I went to vote, but I took precautions: I wore a mask, I tried to maintain my distance from other voters, and I used antibacterial gel repeatedly.

Back then, I wasn't very concerned about the social and economic effects that the virus might pose for the country. Perhaps I was unaware of it, but I was more worried about the population's

access to health services, which is already a major problem. I was also concerned about my own situation, since they were saying that people with chronic illnesses were more vulnerable and should take extra precautions.

Right after the municipal elections, the government declared a state of emergency and a curfew, which meant that people could go out only during certain hours. The first two weeks were extremely nerve-wracking, knowing that we had to stay home and leave only when truly necessary during permitted hours. Adding to the anxiety, I had other concerns regarding the population that I had been working with over the past ten years.

For years, the Dominican state has been implementing discriminatory policies against people of Haitian descent, a population to which I belong. Since 2007, the Central Electoral Board has embraced policies "denationalizing" Dominicans of Haitian descent. These policies started with Circular 017-2007 and Resolution 012-2007, which instructed state officials to refrain from issuing certified copies of birth certificates or other identity documents that contained errors such as erasures, smudges, or different-colored inks, among other things. Although the resolution did not explicitly refer to the children of Haitian immigrants, the circular did, and it was used to justify restricting our access to identity documents (Belique 2019).

Dominicans of Haitian descent have been restrained in our ability to access personal documents such as ID cards and birth certificates. Without these papers, it is nearly impossible to carry out everyday aspects of civic life, such as completing an employment contract, purchasing property, obtaining a bank account, buying a cell phone plan, registering the birth of a child, or acquiring social security benefits. Although there are welfare programs for families living below the poverty line, one needs an ID card to be able to access them.

Every time a Dominican of Haitian descent wishes to obtain a certified copy of his or her birth certificate or ID card, and thereby remedy their undocumented status, civil registry officials argue that the document is under investigation. Such investigations have no deadlines, which means that thousands of people's lives are being paralyzed by the inability to access their documents. These administrative measures have become official policy throughout

the country, leading human rights entities to denounce to the situation and allege a human rights violation.

Because I am the daughter of Haitian immigrants, I have personally been affected by the country's denationalization policy. In 2009, when I went to my town's civil registry office to get a copy of my birth certificate, they denied my request. At the time, I needed the certificate so I could enroll in college. Since I couldn't obtain the document, I wasn't able to enter college until three years later. During this time when my life was on hold, I helped form the movement known as Reconoci.do ("recognized"). This movement, which consists largely of youth from *bateyes*,[1] is an anti-racism campaign that seeks to dismantle government policies based on discrimination against Haitians and their descendants. Since 2011, when the movement took shape, we have actively carried out social mobilization, advocacy, and legal strategies.

In 2013, through Sentence 169-13, the Dominican Constitutional Court ruled on the issue of nationality in the case of Juliana Dequis.[2] The court's holding applied to all of those in the same situation as Juliana—that is, children who were born to irregular migrants between 1929 and 2007. Through its ruling, the Constitutional Court retroactively denationalized more than four generations of individuals born in the country.

According to the most recently available statistics, the children of Haitian immigrants make up 2.7% of the Dominican population (Oficina Nacional de Estadística 2018). Some 133,000 have been rendered stateless, as noted in a 2016 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2017). This is a considerable number of people who have faced systematic exclusion in the country where they were born, including during the current pandemic.

1 Historically, *bateyes* belonged to and were managed by sugar estates, which meant that their authorities fell outside the realm of public administration. Currently, *bateyes* are inhabited largely by Haitian immigrants and their descendants.

2 Tribunal Constitucional, Sentencia 168-13, September 23, 2013.

The State's Measures to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic

Faced with the reality of COVID-19, the Dominican government adopted a number of economic measures aimed at relieving pressure for the thousands of people affected by the pandemic. In light of massive layoffs, the state rolled out a program known as FASE,[3] which ensured a minimum wage for the employees of companies that fulfilled certain criteria. Hundreds of workers were laid off as a result of business closures during the quarantine. At the time of writing, 1,335,611 workers had lost their jobs (Ramírez 2020); however, not all of them have benefitted from the government's programs.

The government's assistance programs sought to protect the formal working class, certain informal workers, heads of household, and individuals with businesses that could not operate during the quarantine. Measures encouraging people to stay at home and providing them with a minimum level of income were among the country's most innovative, for they involved direct payments to affected individuals. Beneficiaries could simply use their ID card number to obtain food from a list of authorized establishments. Some of these families already had the Solidarity Card[4] from the country's welfare program, and those who weren't part of this program received the new benefits through their regular ID card after registering with a hotline.

These measures were a positive development, for they allowed hundreds of thousands of people to secure food simply by presenting their ID card. However, stateless individuals without documentation were unable to benefit due to the mere fact that they lack a national ID card. These are the people whom I support in my work; some are informal laborers (*chiriperos*)—that is, day laborers who tend to lack access to social security benefits.

3 Decreto 143-20 created FASE (the Solidarity Assistance Fund for Employees) to provide unconditional cash transfers to workers whose labor contracts were suspended as a result of the pandemic.

4 The Solidarity Card is part of "a Dominican government program that incorporates vulnerable families into a comprehensive development process through the fulfillment of joint responsibilities linked to cash transfers that contribute to the food and nutritional security of its members" (Progresando con Solidaridad n.d.).

Others are Dominican women of Haitian descent who work largely in domestic labor and who lost their jobs without any type of compensation or benefits during the quarantine. This reality for domestic workers is a common one throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, but Dominican women of Haitian descent often face even deeper implications due to their lack of documentation.

The government had no special plan to support this population. As a result, Dominicans of Haitian descent were completely excluded from the government's measures to control the crisis generated by COVID-19, which exacerbated their vulnerability even more. This was not the first time we have faced exclusion; we confronted the same obstacles when the country adopted a policy of massive denationalization through Constitutional Court Sentence 168-13 and Law 169-14.

This lack of documentation also denies us the right to participate in elections, whether through voting or running for office. In both the imaginary and the rhetoric of conservative sectors, we are not Dominicans, despite having been born in this country; these sectors have taken care to marginalize us in every way possible. They claim that we are Haitians and that giving us voice and vote in the Dominican Republic would be to allow Haiti to peacefully invade the country. This notion of "peaceful invasion" is one of the arguments used by the ultranationalist groups that have incited racial hatred and anti-Haitian sentiments throughout the country.

The crisis caused by COVID-19 has shed light on the direct effects of denationalization and on the extreme inequality faced by Dominicans of Haitian descent. As an electoral year, 2020 has been marked by multiple incidents, including the postponement of municipal elections due to voting machine failures and of presidential elections due to COVID-19.

As a Dominican of Haitian descent, I have argued that our population does not wish to live off the state's welfare programs. Our history of struggle and our parents' sweat and toil bear witness to this. Even so, during this moment of crisis, everyone needs a helping hand; but the ultranationalism, selfishness, and racism of a few prevent us from enjoying something as basic as obtaining a nationality and documentation that can ensure our

access to rights. The Dominican state, in an unprecedented move, has denied this right by rendering hundreds of us stateless in our own land.

August 16 marked a new era in the country: the end of nearly twenty years of Dominican Liberation Party rule. It was precisely during this period that our population's legal problems became more acute. I don't know what awaits us with the new administration, since no party has publicly indicated a desire to defend our rights as a minority group, as doing so could cost them votes or even their political future. However, in light of the consequences being faced by thousands of people and the pressure coming from national and international entities, the government must start providing some answers. I want to keep hope alive that this will be the case, for we are so invisible to the political elite that not even assistance programs designed to address the current pandemic are reaching our community.

Against this backdrop, the only thing we can do is to continue to draw attention to this reality, persevere with our social struggle, and build solidarity. To this end, the Reconoci.do movement and the We Are All Dominicans collective have launched a virtual fundraiser to support vulnerable families among our population. During the first three months of the pandemic, we successfully provided food to some 200 families who, due to the aforementioned barriers, could not access government programs. This achievement was made possible thanks to friends and strangers who showed their solidarity during the pandemic by helping us when the state would not. Despite the difficulties, we continue to forge ahead and make the realities of the invisible visible.

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BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 6
Caught between COVID-19 and the Gallows: Mentally Ill Prisoners in Pakistan

Sana Farrukh
(Pakistan)

I lead the litigation team at Justice Project Pakistan, a Pakistani nongovernmental organization that represents vulnerable prisoners facing harsh punishments at home and abroad. Among the tragic and confounding stories of our clients on death row, Kanizan Bibi's is perhaps the most heartbreaking. She has spent thirty years in deplorable conditions as she awaits the death penalty in Pakistan. Shuffled from psychiatric hospital to jails over her decades behind bars, as of writing this piece, she is imprisoned in Lahore's Central Jail.

Kanizan was fourteen when she met the family whose murder she would eventually be convicted of. A child laborer with a dead mother, she looked after a wealthy landowning family in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab, to earn enough money to support her own. Two years after commencing her work, nearly the entire family was murdered—all except her employer, Khan Muhammad. Ten days after their tragic deaths, when the authorities couldn't pin down the culprits, the police arrested Kanizan and her employer. It was alleged that the two had an affair and that they conspired to kill the rest of his family. Until his dying day in 2003, when he was executed, Khan Muhammad claimed that he had been framed by relatives due to a property dispute. He also maintained that Kanizan was innocent and that there had never been an illicit relationship between them.

Kanizan is a middle-aged Pakistani woman. To visit her over the last two years, a few times a month we would drive for more than four hours from Lahore to Rawalpindi, get out of the car outside the main gate—which is attached to high walls monitored by gunmen—and make our way over a dry, dusty brick path to a registration area. Sometimes, we were asked to join the prison's

superintendent for tea. Other times, we were refused entry into the building. As a lawyer representing prisoners on death row in Pakistan, I have a somewhat temperamental relationship with the prisons that hold my clients. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, my interactions with prisons take place over habitually unanswered letters and rushed phone calls—prisons have become even more impenetrable than they were before.

The first time I made the journey to visit Kanizan at Rawalpindi's Central Jail, our delegation met the superintendent in his office first. There were biscuits and tea, and pleasantries were exchanged. The jovial atmosphere of these prison offices—routinely filled with a barrage of "pleases" and "thank yous," as if they were any other government office—belies the quiet desperation of thousands of locked-up bodies a few meters away.

Kanizan, who had been brought out from her cell, was waiting for us a few hallways away. She smiled but barely made eye contact, and she hardly signaled any responses to our questions. I wish I could say that I felt she understood any of it—who we were, why we came, and whether it could change anything.

Kanizan's tale is harrowing, and I struggle with its heavy details. She was a sixteen-year-old child when she was brutally beaten and electrocuted by the police for nearly fifteen days. They let rats loose in her trousers, which they tied shut at the bottom so the rats couldn't escape. Her screams were heard by neighbors who lived near the police station. Based largely on her false confession, she was convicted and sentenced to death, and she has now served some thirty years behind bars.

After living in appalling prison conditions and suffering severe mental health problems, in 2000, Kanizan was diagnosed with schizophrenia and shifted to a mental health facility for treatment. In 2017, she was abruptly moved back into Lahore's Central Jail for administrative reasons, essentially depriving her of the critical medical care to which she is entitled. In 2018, the Chief Justice of Pakistan took notice of her case and ordered that a mental health evaluation be conducted; based on the results, he then recommended that her case be considered for commutation. He commented that it was "beyond sense or reason that we execute mentally ill individuals," and on this basis, she was shifted back into the mental health facility (Bilal 2018).

Some say that Kanizan stopped speaking shortly after being tortured by the police at age sixteen. She is now in her mid-forties. We know for certain that she hasn't spoken a word in at least a decade.

As with many other jobs, working with prisoners requires some emotional detachment. Generally, my anxiety that I am failing our clients in some way is a continuous low hum that rises and falls in the pit of my stomach. It changed into nervous anticipation for a few days in early March, when our organization ran a campaign for Kanizan on International Women's Day, in the hopes that her case would be heard by the Supreme Court. A joint statement by civil society organizations was signed, and we marched for her at the Aurat March, an annual women's march that takes place across the country. And it worked: her hearing date was fixed for March 30. After two years of inaction by the court, she would finally face the chance to be set free.

Then COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. Once again, Kanizan's case was indefinitely postponed. Across the world, court hearings have been canceled, resulting in arduous consequences for many people behind bars.

However, my most immediate concern at the moment is not Kanizan's freedom but her well-being. She spent the first three months of the pandemic stuck in Rawalpindi's overcrowded Central Jail, where she had been shifted to undergo the mental health evaluation that may have set her free. Kanizan is severely mentally ill. Rendered mute by trauma, she only occasionally recognizes the people she should be familiar with, and on some days, she cannot feed or dress herself. When my colleague last visited her, before there was an indefinite ban placed on prison visitation, Kanizan was crying and extremely distressed but couldn't communicate what was wrong. She had my colleague write down her phone number. It cuts at me to think about that—even if she remembered the visit later, what was she going to do with my colleague's number? Who would help her call us? How would she even tell prison staff what she wanted to say?

As someone who is oblivious to her own surroundings on ordinary days, I worry that she cannot revive the self-awareness needed to survive during a pandemic. Kanizan is in a death row cell, many of which do not have access to a functional toilet. Moreover,

she is unlikely to be able to take precautionary measures such as frequent and thorough handwashing. She may not be able to communicate her needs to staff or even have the presence of mind to know when she is experiencing worrying symptoms.

Pakistan's first case of COVID-19 in prisons was found on March 23, 2020. As of April 23, there were ninety-eight confirmed cases; but because testing is limited, the actual number is likely much higher. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and underfunding make prisons an optimal site for the spread of infectious disease.

In early June, there was an outbreak of COVID-19 in Rawalpindi's Central Jail, where Kanizan and three of our other mentally ill clients were being detained. The jail doctor, who routinely examined the prisoners, tested positive himself and had infected a prisoner who was under trial. There is grossly insufficient testing in these jails, and our clients are at the mercy of authorities' negligence.

At the end of June, Kanizan was finally shifted from Rawalpindi's Central Jail to Lahore's Central Jail—the first step in getting her back into the mental health facility she needs. However, it is now early September, and it appears that she was merely shifted from one crowded prison to another.

Despite the difficulties with lawyers visiting their clients due to the pandemic, I was able to visit Kanizan in August. She didn't recognize me. I spoke with her, although it wasn't clear if she could understand me. When I inquired if she preferred this jail over the one in Rawalpindi, she began to cry and shake her head, gesturing as if she were wearing handcuffs. I held her hand and told her no one was sending her anywhere, that we were going to help her. For a few brief moments, I felt as though she understood. She held my hand tightly and cried harder. Then she put her hand on my head, thanking me for something I hadn't done yet.

I asked Kanizan to try to write her responses to my questions. It took her a long time, but in the end, the few broken sentences she scribbled were enough to make a lasting impact:

> Those people who are cruel, why is it that not even mosquitos bite them? Those who murder are saved. Those who don't murder live in jails like orphans. I have been in jail for 10 years. I have a daughter, I want to go where she is.

The lady deputy superintendent informed me that Kanizan cries often and that when pressed as to why, she communicates in a limited manner that she is innocent and stuck in jail. Kanizan doesn't have a daughter—it is likely that she is referring to someone who interacted with her while at the Punjab Institute of Mental health. Kanizan's mind doesn't process the temporal gravity of the injustice that has happened to her. She has been in jail three times as long as she thinks she has. Thirty years of incarceration has taken a lot from her, but it is apparent that nothing can dim for her the gross injustice she has faced. Here is Kanizan, who, despite her afflictions, holds on to her wrongful incarceration as one of the last facts she knows.

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners state that "prisoners should enjoy the same standards of healthcare that are available in the community" (United Nations General Assembly 2015). The Pakistan Prison Rules of 1978, which are currently undergoing reform, attempt to bring the prison administration regime in line with international best practices. However, even where rules exist, they are rarely followed in spirit. For example, rule 146 provides for release of prisoners on the ground of old age, infirmity, or illness. It has never been applied.

At the moment, we are tracking down Kanizan's "daughter" and are preparing to file an application for an early hearing before the Supreme Court. Kanizan has been featured as a case study in a report on women prisoners published by the federal government in August 2020. At Justice Project Pakistan, we push in all directions, and I am hopeful that through these efforts, Kanizan will finally secure her freedom. With our clients, there is loss after loss until suddenly something works—and then there is one less person in a jail cell that perhaps not even the guilty, let alone someone like Kanizan, deserve. For now, as COVID-19 threatens the lives of vulnerable prisoners across the world, we are pushing harder than ever to get Kanizan back into a mental health facility where she can be kept safe.

Outside detention, social distancing is a privilege available to few. In prisons, it is inconceivable. In detention, basic rights are seen as privileges: personal space is a privilege, the agency to wash one's hands is a privilege, seeking treatment is a privilege.

Sentenced to imprisonment, and sometimes sentenced to death, these wards of the state are not sentenced to decay. Yet the unabated spread of disease discloses a different truth. Our belief in prisoners' right to health care is as feeble as our immunity in the face of the plague of our time.

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CHAPTER 7
Self-Determination: The Built-In Resiliency of Indigenous Communities

Mary Louise Dumas
(Philippines)

"I will not hesitate. My orders are—to the police and military, including the *barangay*—if there is chaos and they fight back and your lives are put at stake, shoot them dead," President Duterte said in his televised update on the government's efforts against the virus.

This came after some residents of poor urban communities protested and were arrested on April 1. The residents had complained that they had not received any government support since the imposition of Metro Manila's lockdown in mid-March. This meant two weeks of immobility—and, for most (if not all) of those who subsist on daily wages, two weeks of not having a decent meal. To these communities, the president directed his threat: "I will not hesitate to order the police to arrest and detain you. And if you are detained, you provide your own food."

The Most Brutal Lockdown

Metro Manila experienced the longest—and most brutal—lockdown in the world. I was fortunate enough to live in the southern part of the country at the time. Our city was a medium-risk area, with our first few patients coming mostly from other parts of the region given that we happen to have the referral center. Our mayor refused to impose an "enhanced community quarantine," saying that he wanted to retain as much normalcy as possible.

But it was a different story elsewhere in the country. My friend who was stuck in Metro Manila told me how the police there went around in full battle gear. We joked that maybe they were trying to shoot the virus or scare it with their guns and bombs. But really, we were concerned how the poor sectors would survive the lockdown—suddenly, people who had been living a hand-to-mouth

existence were left without work, and there was little support from the government. And when they decided to protest, they were made the villains of the pandemic.

At the start of the outbreak, President Duterte refused to suspend the flights going to and from China, even as the disease had already spread to eighteen countries and there were already patients under close monitoring in the Philippines. It was only after the first COVID-19 case was confirmed that he placed an order to stop the entry of foreign visitors into the country.

Regardless of whether the government was pandering to China—a big economic supporter of the present administration—the consequences turned out to be disastrous. After a spike in the number of infections in Metro Manila, the government declared a lockdown there on March 15, 2020. Not surprisingly, the government's response to the pandemic was militaristic in character. Again came a "shoot them all" solution from the president, just as he had responded to other issues in the country—for example, the bloody anti-drug campaign and the intensified attacks against activists and government critics.

Down South

Our institution, the Samdhana Institute, works primarily with indigenous peoples and local communities. When our city of Cagayan de Oro City was placed under community quarantine, it was difficult to reach those who were outside the city. We were hearing rumors that elsewhere in the country, companies were taking advantage of the situation to enter ancestral territories.

"Good afternoon. We are no longer allowed to leave our houses," came a message from Datu Benjie, a leader of the indigenous Serukadang Menuvu community, one of our partner indigenous communities.

I tried to respond with a calming message. I told him it was the same in other areas of the country, as many regions had imposed border lockdowns and community quarantines. I urged him to find out where community members could get "quarantine passes," which allow at least one member of each household to go out to buy food.

But the community's worry, I knew, stemmed from its circumstances even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The Serukadang

Menuvu community, which lives in Don Carlos, Bukidnon, had been conducting a series of territorial reclamations. This small community had long been bordered by sugarcane plantations and mono-crop settler farms granted leases by the state. Prior to the passage of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, the community's lands had been classified as timberland, which meant under Philippine law that the state could lease the land to any individual or corporation. Since the indigenous community had mostly been illiterate and was not aware of these land management agreements, these leases eventually covered their ancestral lands. Individuals who had money and influence were also able to secure private land titles for parts of the indigenous territory.

The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, which protects indigenous peoples' land rights, was passed in 1997. It stipulates that indigenous peoples have prior rights to their ancestral domain and have the right to reclaim lands that were unjustly taken from them. Moreover, they have the right to any lands that were previously classified as public lands—meaning untitled lands—that fall within their ancestral domain. However, the Serukadang Menuvu community learned of this law only recently, after being exposed to different indigenous peoples' gatherings through our partnership. But they immediately asserted their rights and started tilling small areas of their ancestral domain where plantation and settler leases had expired.

These areas, however, are not big. So far, the community has been able to reclaim only two hectares. And it has not been easy. One time, as they were doing *bayanihan*—tilling the land together as a community—the previous leaseholder brought his tractor and ploughed down their work, almost running over the elderly matriarch of Datu Benjie's clan. Despite this, the community persisted. With the small piece of land, they had been able to plant corn, other vegetables, and different types of fruit.

In March of this year, they tried to reclaim two more hectares of land. But this time, they were met more forcefully by the leaseholder, who this time came accompanied by local government officials. Again, the seedlings that the community had planted—including one that they had planted as part of a ritual—were ploughed down. After the incident, they noticed certain individuals following them whenever they left their community. As a

result of these experiences, it was easy for them to suspect that the added restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic were somehow connected to their ongoing land-related struggles.

But they were able to sort out their current problem: community members eventually got their quarantine passes. They established a system where certain members of the community would go out in twos or threes to fish and gather food from their remaining forests. Occasionally, Datu Benjie would inform me about what food they were able to get—the remaining root crops they had set aside from the last time they harvested, wild honey, and other plants that I had never heard of.

Toward the end of April, however, our brief exchanges shifted their focus to the weather. The community could not plant yet, because the mid-summer rains they expected had not come. And eventually, he said that they were nearing the point of exhausting what resources they had.

The Innate Resiliency of Indigenous Peoples

It took me several hours to reply to that last message. The Samdhana Institute had been able to arrange a few rounds of relief distributions in the communities within our city. But Serukadang Menuvu community's province, which is just next to ours, had very strict lockdown rules—no one from outside could go in, and residents who insisted on leaving the province would not be allowed to come back.

What could we possibly do? At best, we could coordinate by phone with their local government offices and make sure that community members were included in beneficiary lists. But was that sustainable for our partner communities? I knew my question was coming from my context—sitting in front of a computer, working comfortably from home. How could I presume to know better than them?

In the end, all I replied to Datu Benjie was, "What do you plan to do?" To which he replied, "We will think about it." That was probably the best answer I could expect.

The Serukadang Menuvu community is among the most resilient partner communities we work with. The community's older generations flourished on a subsistence economy. But because they have been deprived of their access to most of their territory,

they have had to resort to seeking daily wages. The area they can till is so limited that they are able to follow only one cropping pattern and are therefore more vulnerable to weather disruptions.

For the most part, their livelihood has become dependent on their income as farm workers. But just before the pandemic struck, neighboring farms refused to hire them, possibly fearing that their areas too might be reclaimed as part of the Serukadang Menuvu ancestral domain. With the lockdown, community members could not travel beyond their immediate neighbors to look for odd jobs that would have sustained them while they waited for the next cropping season.

Additionally, the community struggles for the recognition of its right to representation—through the mandated indigenous peoples' representative under the Local Government Code—in village-level local government units. So when the municipal government gave out food packs during the lockdown, because the community had been informed late, not all of the families were able to get relief goods. Community leaders decided to simply pool the packs received and divide them equally among all households. The local government unit offered no support whatsoever.

These issues highlight the compounded problems faced by indigenous communities in the Philippines at this time of the pandemic. They are being forced to depend on the mainstream market economy, their ancestral territories are no longer under their control, and these lands are barely accessible to them. And yet in a time of crisis, these communities are not prioritized for support.

But throughout the decades of having to fight for their very existence, indigenous communities have also managed to build resiliency. When the Philippines' urban populations resorted to panic buying at the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, the indigenous communities had already turned to their former hunting and gathering traditions. They know their territory, as well as the plants and animals around them. Unfortunately, in my work as a coordinator of a small grants program, I have met with indigenous communities who have been so exposed to external aid that they have forgotten their own capacities.

Just in February of this year, I was doing my monitoring rounds, facilitating some project assessments. One Tagbanwa indigenous community from the western Philippines was trying to

secure their certificate of ancestral domain title. They expressed their seemingly insurmountable difficulties: their local governments do not listen to them, the government agency established to support them had neither the staff nor the funds to help them, and they had no lawyer. It was, for them, an against-all-odds struggle. They asked me who they could turn to. And I told them the truth—there was no one.

That is, no one except themselves. As an "outsider," the only thing I could do for them was remind them that they needed to build their strength and networks. They needed to unite with other communities facing the same problems, so that they could be stronger when going against the odds. Support groups like ours could only do so much—our funds can provide only some ease in mobility, in hastening some gatherings that otherwise might take longer to organize. But the work had to be theirs.

So, in a pandemic like the one we are experiencing right now, what can they do? They are the only ones who can answer this question. And I know they will find a solution. As long as they keep their traditions and knowledge systems alive, they will survive—even more than us in the urban areas, so dependent on the markets and used to consuming what we do not know how to produce.

The answer goes beyond the COVID-19 crisis. It goes beyond the problem of temporary lockdowns. It is rooted in their land, their struggle to fight for and defend their territories.

Right now, the lockdowns and quarantines are starting to ease up. Soon it will rain, and the communities will be able to plant.

BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 8
COVID Mahamaari: Grassroots Experiences from Kerala, India

Neha Miriam Kurian
(India)

The COVID-19 pandemic is called “COVID Mahamaari” in Malayalam, the language native to Kerala, the southernmost state in India where I hail from. The word Mahamaari translates not just to “pandemic” but also to “big storm,” quite like the monsoons that Kerala normally experiences—just bigger, more terrifying, more unpredictable. And that’s exactly what COVID-19 is proving to be for Kerala, just like it has for most other parts of the world. Each day, the situation is changing, and new lessons are being learned and unlearned.

In the early days of the pandemic, the state of Kerala did everything possible to get ahead of the pandemic (Kurian 2020). In early January, when cases were reported in Wuhan, the state set up testing at the airports. And this proved very useful, since the first case that was reported in India—toward the end of January—was that of a medical student returning from Wuhan to Kerala. Thanks to airport testing, the patient was identified at the airport and moved to a hospital immediately.

Even before the nationwide lockdown was imposed, the Kerala Health Department launched a statewide campaign called “Break the Chain” to raise awareness around the need for handwashing and social distancing. Handwashing kiosks and sanitizer kiosks were set up in public places and in front of all government offices. Contact tracing of anyone who reported positive during this time was done through a combination of technology and committed grassroots-level health workers. Strict protocols were issued, and there was regular follow-up by health officials to ensure that those who were in quarantine didn’t violate it. Local government bodies arranged infrastructure for the institutional quarantine of those who did not have adequate space or a

conducive setting in their homes. Community kitchens were set up to provide free or subsidized food to those who needed it in the event of a lockdown.

All of these steps could be attributed to a number of features somewhat unique to Kerala, particularly the state's strong decentralized governance framework, well-established grassroots-level public health infrastructure, spirit of volunteerism that helped Kerala during recent disasters, and lessons learned from these disasters (a devastating cyclone in 2017, floods in 2018 and 2019, and a Nipah virus outbreak in 2018). In December 2019, in an effort to capitalize on these very features, Kerala also initiated a unique social experiment: a bottom-up disaster management planning process through the state's 1,034 local self-government bodies (Heller 2020).

Therefore, in early April 2020, just a week after India imposed a nationwide lockdown, Kerala rejoiced that it was getting ahead of the virus.

However, six months down the line, the initial euphoria has faded. COVID-19 is proving to be a long, drawn-out battle with no clear end in sight—and while residents have become acclimatized to the dangers of the virus and the restrictions in and around their lives, fear around COVID-19 and the social and economic repercussions of the lockdown still pose major threats, as Kerala has been seeing a second wave of cases. And now, in the second phase of the lockdown—which was imposed as a result of the resurgence in cases—other issues are cropping up that will test Kerala's long-term resilience in a post-COVID world.

A Marathon, Not a Sprint

Early on during the pandemic, Kerala recognized the importance of ensuring the free flow of information. From state-wide campaigning through local self-governments and grassroots networks of health workers, to daily press conferences held by the chief minister, the state government tried to ensure the spread of accurate information about the disease and government protocols to all corners of the state. Being a highly digitally literate state, the government also made use of social media platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp, to ensure last-mile delivery. Special attention was also taken to guarantee that marginalized

groups—including migrant laborers from other states and people from economically disadvantaged sections—also received the requisite attention.

However, in March, there was an incidence of unrest among a group of migrant construction laborers from the northern states, who revolted and demanded that they be allowed to go back to their homes across state borders. Rendered jobless and cashless in the midst of the lockdown, they gathered on the streets without any regard for physical distancing or other COVID-19 protocols. It was later discovered that the immediate trigger for their unrest had been a set of fake WhatsApp messages. The government dealt with this immediately by engaging people fluent in the workers' language to communicate with them; at the same time, however, this exposed the faults in a system that is largely sculpted by the demands of mainstream society and not the outliers.

In July, another situation arose wherein, in the aftermath of a cluster spread of the disease in a coastal village in southern Kerala, the government imposed a complete lockdown in the village, going so far as to deploy police commandos to ensure that people didn't leave their homes. But what this meant was that fish workers, who relied on daily wages for subsistence, were shut inside their small houses without any means to earn money. They, too, gathered on the streets to protest, failing to maintain COVID-19 protocols. This event was later blown out of proportion on social media by mainstream society and its lack of understanding of marginalized communities' realities. Here as well, even though the government took immediate steps to engage with the fish workers to resolve the situation, the situation showed how vulnerable groups were rendered even more vulnerable in the face of a pandemic.

Issues around the digital divide have also showed their face during the pandemic. For instance, when classes were moved online after months of no school, it became evident that many students from marginalized sectors didn't have access to the same type of technology that the rest of the society did. While the government has taken steps to support students from such backgrounds in gaining access to the requisite technology, this has not been without its casualties. At least three students committed suicide as a result of dejection from being unable to access their virtual classes.

The same goes for jobs. While many of those employed in white-collar jobs and in Kerala's information technology sector have been able to work from home and continue earning a salary similar to what they were earning before, this has not been the case for persons working in the informal sector. With reduced demand and disrupted supply chains, these workers have been facing economic vulnerability like never before. Here again, while the government has taken multiple steps to address the situation—such as issuing moratoriums on loan repayments and other types of direct money transfers—in the long run, much more may be required to ensure that the impact of such disasters does not cripple sections of society that are already struggling in the harsh, unforgiving realities of the neoliberal world.

The Road Ahead

The road ahead from COVID-19 is not going to be easy for any part of the world, least of all developing countries and their marginalized populations. With regard to Kerala—a hazard-prone state caught in the throes of climate change—multiple disasters in recent times have been rendering the population increasingly vulnerable. Unlike before, rainfall during the monsoon season has become more unpredictable and intense. And even in the midst of the pandemic, Kerala faced multiple tragedies on the same day, when a major landslide took the lives of nearly seventy impoverished plantation workers and a plane crash caused by bad weather killed almost twenty passengers.

The decentralized developmental model that Kerala has been hailed for over the past two and a half decades offers some hope for long-term community resilience. So far, this has been what has been helping Kerala move forward in these troubled times. And it may offer lessons for other parts of the world. From local neighborhood groups that offer credit, to local health workers who know every nook and cranny of their areas, Kerala has the tools necessary to build self-resilience among communities. But that said, even Kerala needs to build on its existing strengths, learn from the present crisis, and remain vigilant to ensure that its policies post-COVID-19 remain people centric.

This is because the post-COVID-19 world is definitely not going to be the same. It will need many levels of reinvention and

reorientation, perhaps even without any time for planning or preparation. It may also mean that we could fall prey to short-term technocratic solutions that sideline lived experience and community-held knowledge. Such a scenario needs to be avoided at all costs. And for this very reason, this is a time for Kerala to strengthen its decentralized model even further to ensure that it holds the hands of those who suffer amidst such tragedies and works toward an even more egalitarian society.

Perhaps one example from a village in Kerala could teach us something: a leader from the local self-government, upon learning that someone from his area was being stigmatized by neighbors as a result of a fake WhatsApp message claiming that he was a COVID-19 patient, chose to do something unique. Even amidst the lockdown and social distancing requirements, the leader chose to hold this man's hand and walk publicly through the village's main roads. Through his actions, he demonstrated that in troubled times, it is only mutual trust that can help us move forward.

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BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 9
The Unequal Pandemic

Cristián Sanhueza Cubillos
(Chile)

It all began the second week in March. I was in Santiago, Chile, about to travel to Easter Island for an event with the Ma'u Henua community, the largest indigenous community of the Rapanui people and of the entire country. The community was going to convene a meeting to discuss the constitutional referendum slated for April 2020. For the first time in Chilean history, citizens would determine whether the country would draft a new Constitution, following Congress's decision in 2019 to hold a national referendum. This development, unprecedented in Chilean constitutional history, was the product of massive protests in October 2019.

However, neither my trip nor the referendum took place as scheduled. The arrival of the pandemic put democracy on hold—and with it, the aspirations of tomorrow. I had been about to travel to the navel of the world but ended up staring at my own.

In any case, the virus made its way to the island. A rapid coordination effort among indigenous families on the island convinced local authorities to adopt measures to prevent the massive spreading of the virus. Thus, beginning in March 2020, the island renowned for its moais found itself closed off from the world, with a ban on incoming and outgoing passenger flights. And while—at the time of writing this chapter—COVID-19 cases on the island have risen dramatically, tourism has ceased. Of the approximately 130,000 visits that Rapa Nui receives each year, today the only trips that are permitted are for bringing supplies and for responding to urgent care cases. Tourism—the island's main source of income—has been squelched by the pandemic.

According to estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2020), if governments do not take action, the current health crisis could become a food crisis that,

in Chile's case, would affect a million people, or nearly 5% of the country's population. Meanwhile, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2020) has warned that almost a million people in Chile are at risk of falling into poverty, which would bring the portion of the population living in poverty to 13.7%—an unparalleled increase since the country's return to democracy in 1990. Along the same lines, in July 2020, the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas 2020) noted that the country's unemployment rate was 12.2%, the highest in the last ten years. Thus, it seems that the "new normal" navigates familiar but deeper waters: hunger, unemployment, and precariousness.

Various governments around the world, supported by media outlets, have popularized a discourse of a "new normal" that, in itself, is far from new. Neither the presence of a far-reaching virus nor its effects on the most vulnerable is something that should surprise us. In 1939, Chilean writer Nicomedes Guzmán published *Los hombres oscuros* (*Dark Men*), a short novel that portrays the proletarian life of a Santiago tenement during a period of social crisis. Coincidentally, the story is told by "Pablo Acevedo," a shoe shiner whose love is frustrated by the pandemic, which at that time was typhus. Perhaps my pessimism would argue, then, that there is nothing original about today's scenario: a story of overcrowding, of the bread that is shared—in short, of an unequal pandemic that becomes the new normal.

That said, it is striking to see how quickly rules and standards are being produced to adapt this "new normal" to people's lives, even though people are not playing a role in such production. As if there were no other alternative, the constitutional "state of catastrophe" in Chile has provided the legal support for attending to the needs of these times. In a way, law hastens normalization by dissipating what is new through a rule that prevails on a day-to-day basis. In this sense, in Chile the law has been used to entrench new practices that benefit the few at the expense of the many. The amendment of labor legislation during the state of catastrophe allowed large conglomerates to "suspend" their relationships with their employees, who had to use on their own unemployment insurance to sustain a monthly income during the pandemic. Meanwhile, these same companies distributed profits

to their shareholders that exceeded the legal limit. As cautioned by Walter Benjamin (2020), the reality of the oppressed demonstrates that the "state of emergency in which we live is the rule," and Chile offers an apt example.

In parallel, during this so-called new normal, the city of Santiago, particularly the commune by the same name, has implemented some of the most restrictive measures in Latin America, if not the planet. The city has now experienced more than nine months of police checkpoints, soldiers in the streets, curfews, closed restaurants, vacant rental properties, and the never-ending advice to "stay home." And here, in the homification of life, our world behind four walls is reproducing the inequalities of the outside. UN Women Executive Director Phumzille Miambo-Ngcuka has warned of the "shadow pandemic" of violence against women (UN Women 2020). The silent effects of the pandemic have followed suit. According to a recent Social Thermometer Survey, conducted by the University of Chile's Millennium Nucleus in Social Development, the pandemic has led to a deterioration in mental health, particularly among women (55.6% of the women surveyed reported feeling worse off or much worse off than before the pandemic, compared to 42.8% of the men surveyed) (Núcleo Milenio en Desarrollo Social, Centro de Microdatos de la Universidad de Chile, and Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social 2020). In fact, a study by the Center for Surveys and Longitudinal Studies examining the distribution of household work found that 34% of men spent *zero* hours each week performing household chores, compared to just 14% of women who did the same (Alonso 2020).

The pandemic does not so much establish a new normal as compound the differences upon which an apparent "normal" is already sustained. In part, what is new is the use of the exception to create a normality. In other words, the pandemic is used to carry out measures that otherwise would not have occurred, such as the ability to telecommute, increased cyber surveillance, and the amplification of the private over the public. Even in Chile, in the absence of measures to support the household economy, the government has allowed Chileans to withdraw up to 10% of their hard-earned retirement savings. This is an unprecedented move for the country's pension system, which for years was fiercely

defended by those who fought to maintain private control over the pension funds. Without a doubt, COVID-19 has set afloat other inequalities in how we face the risk of death—or, put another way, how we survive.

The capacities with which we have responded to this pandemic are far from the positions we occupy in society. While some people flee Chile's large cities for their second homes on the beach, others face double confinement, both from the virus and from the inequalities of the "normal" that they have been experiencing since before the pandemic: overcrowding, fear of violence (including at the hands of family members), leaving home at dawn and returning exhausted at night—in short, the daily hunger that eats away at the hope for a better life. Where surviving is the exception.

It seems paradoxical at this point in civilization: it's the twenty-first century, yet injustices remain strong. But as Kathryn Sikkink (2018) writes, there is *evidence for hope*. In her identically titled book, she offers empirical evidence of the effectiveness of human rights in recent decades, arguing that they have helped reduce violence and increase access to health and education. Although much remains to be done, Sikkink maintains that the fulfilment of human rights is more a process than an end point. It is not a discrete task but one that requires constant efforts to widen the limits of the possible.

Thus, in times of despair, we must reclaim the law as a tool for transformation and stand up for those who demand a better life, or recover the necessary conditions so the future can remain open. In this way, human rights will no longer act passively by merely reminding us of the dignity we deserve and helping us escape from violations; instead, they will operate as a catalyst for the inherent condition of all humans: the possibility of forming part of the truths that inhabit the world. In the words of Alain Badiou (2000), our job is to "construct equality."

In this regard, human rights share this unique feature of the exception: being on the other side of order, of normality. In other words, the reverse side of the law contains aspects of justice that are also worth exploring. As envisioned by Manuel Atienza (2017), the law is not a uniform reality but rather something in which the age-old distinction between law and morality is replaced by a

legal practice that refrains from separating objectives from values. In a pandemic situation where the inertia of our accelerated pace of life has been disrupted, the question we must ask ourselves is what society we aspire to achieve and what seals we will place on the creation of new meanings that emerge against the grain.

As argued by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015), in scenarios such as those that the world is currently experiencing (totalitarianism, technological control, violence), the challenge is to articulate contradictions around a shared aim. We need to envision utopias that offer "something beyond the stale repetition of the same offered by the eternal present of capitalism" (ibid.). The oppressive normality that shutters the windows of possible worlds is unsustainable. And the future is open enough to stamp out normalities that exclude the exceptions that defy what is common, expected, normal. This is critical in a constituent political scenario whose challenge is to build a social pact capable of accommodating the aspirations of tomorrow and not limiting them to indefatigable repetition.

As I finish this chapter, it is October 2020, nearly one year after the "social uprising" that inspired Chile's decision to pursue constitutional reform. For 365 days, a state of emergency has accompanied many Chileans' hopes for a new country. After months of quarantine, people have once again taken to the streets to call for equality. Plaza Baquedano, named after a nineteenth-century general, has been unofficially renamed Dignity Plaza: the necessary ingredient for ensuring that we are more than animals that refuse to die. To ensure that we are, together, boundless humanity.

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Pandemic Inequality

Civil Society Narratives from the Global South

How might we think about the COVID-19 pandemic from the lens of inequality? How might such an analysis look when writing from Lahore or Abuja as compared to writing from London or San Francisco? How can it help us rethink our role as advocates and members of civil society, as well as our forms of solidarity?

This book explores these questions through the narratives of young human rights advocates from the global South—from Nigeria to the Philippines to India to Chile. The authors discuss the latent structural inequalities that the pandemic has deepened, exposed, or suppressed, as well as those that broke people's already fragile trust in governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations. They also explore the strategies of resilience and creative social organizing that have helped confront the pandemic around the globe.

The contributors to this book, writing from different perspectives, invite us to consider what we can learn from the interplay between the pandemic and inequality in order to spur a creative reorientation of collective mobilization and advocacy toward the future.

Dejusticia