

# POLITICS, POWER & RESISTANCE

WEEK 9: GENDER & POWER  
PROFESSOR ALANA LENTIN, CULTURE & SOCIETY



# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

# OUTLINE

- Gender as politics
- Inventing gender
- Approaches to gender
  - Social Reproduction
  - Gender, race, class
  - Coloniality of gender
- Gender as a site of violence
  - State violence
  - Global violence
- Feminism Action for Justice



Gender is above all a system of power and a site of political and social struggle. It is quite similar to race in that it is a powerful idea about how to organise the world which has become difficult to disentangle from how we see ourselves.

To understand this, we need to firstly explain where the idea of gender comes from. It is not natural, but rather is historically and socially constructed as a binary.

There are different approaches to the study of gender. Guided by our guest interviewee, Professor of sociology and gender studies, Alison Phipps from Newcastle University in the UK, we will be introduced to two key approaches: social reproduction and the coloniality of gender

As feminist writer, Lola Olufemi writes, we often see the liberal state as the solution to gender inequality. However, the state is directly responsible for reproducing gendered oppression through laws and policies that negatively affect women and queer people, especially those who are poor. We will look at some of the ways the state produces gendered and sexual violence.

Violence against women has exploded around the world. As the Marxist feminist, Silvia Federici explains, we need to understand this violence in the context of the greater pressures on women to be responsible both for the domestic sphere and for working to fuel the economy. Women and gender-diverse people often come under fire when the pressures of the modern capitalist system become unbearable; leading to them becoming the scapegoats.

Despite the extent of gendered violence and domination, women and queer people are fighting back.

What are some examples of how social movements are resisting gender oppression and state violence?

# **I: GENDER AS POLITICS**

# GENDER AS POLITICS



The issue of gender has never not been political.

But at present it appears as though conflicts about the rights of women and gender diverse people to freedom and equality are under grave threat.

Issues such as reproductive rights and the freedom of transgender people to live without control and to have access to basic rights such as healthcare seem to be dangerously under threat.

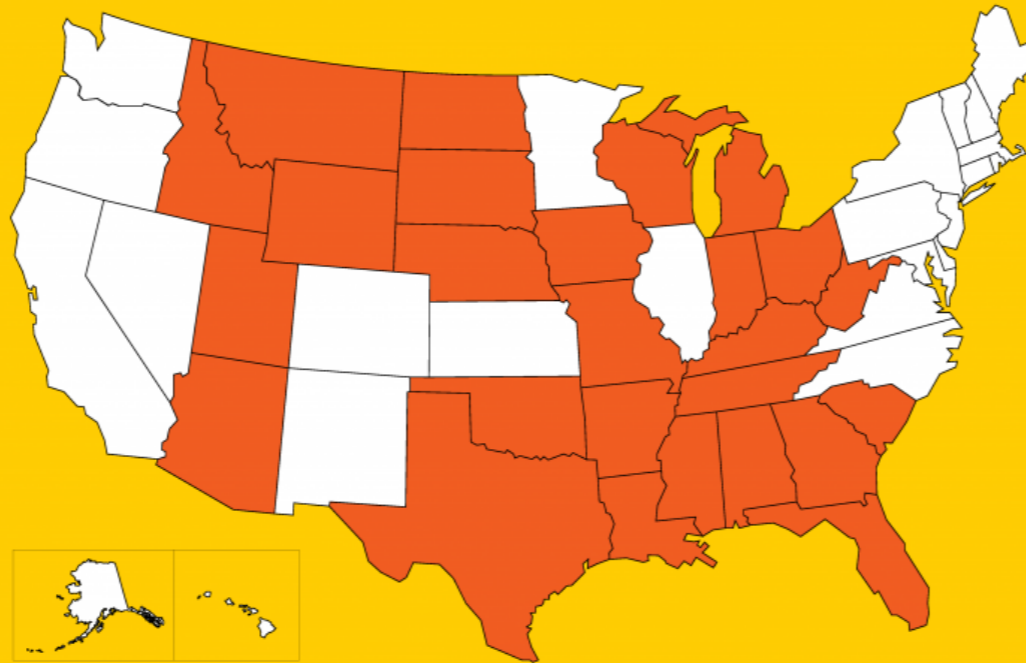
This comes at the same time as more and more people are questioning the idea of gender as a strict binary, with roles and destinies for men and women. When we understand the link between gender and power, we can understand why asking these questions poses a threat to the social order.

Today, rights acquired by women and gender diverse people - though far from assured - are being dismantled.

For example, in the US state of Oklahoma, the state house passed a bill criminalizing all abortions in April 2022. There are no exceptions for rape or incest. The governor is likely to sign the bill meaning it will soon become law. Doctors could be imprisoned for up to 10 years for performing an abortion. Similar legislation already exists in Texas.

GUTTMACHER INSTITUTE

**If the U.S. Supreme Court overturns or guts *Roe v. Wade*, 26 states are certain or likely to ban abortion**



guttmacher.org

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In 1973, the US Supreme Court overturned abortion bans which were in operation across many US states with the Supreme Court ruling in the Roe vs. Wade case.

There is a risk today that that could be overruled, meaning that many states - the orange ones on the map - will move to ban abortion again

**References:**

<https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2021/10/26-states-are-certain-or-likely-ban-abortion-without-roe-heres-which-ones-and-why>



In January 2021, a near total ban on abortion was enforced in Poland.

**References:**

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55838210>



"Not a Single Woman Dead  
Due to Clandestine Abortion"

Meanwhile although abortion was legalised in Argentina in 2020 after decades of protest, obstetricians and gynaecologists are registering as conscientious objectors and refusing to grant them. And opponents of the right to choose are using the courts to try to block abortions.

#### References:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/world/americas/argentina-abortion-opposition.html>



Texas transgender activist, Kai Shappley, 11, named Time Kid of the Year finalist

At the same time, transgender children and their parents are under attack in US states such as Texas where officials declared some gender reassignment therapies "child abuse" under state law and parents who allow them could lose custody of their children.

Many families are currently attempting to relocate to other US states to avoid this criminalisation.



Meanwhile there is an attempt to turn the issue of the tiny minority of transgender women in sports into an issue in the Australian federal election.

Senator Claire Chandler has introduced a bill to restrict trans women playing in female sports called the “save women’s sport” bill. The idea is people who are assigned female at birth should not have to compete against transgender women. In reality a) this is already covered by existing legislation and b) there are very few transgender women in sports and they do not necessarily have a physical advantage over other women. Success in sport is inherently based on having physical advantages whatever your gender identity may be.

However, the issue is becoming a focal point for the election, potentially detracting from other more pressing concerns for women, such as violence and inequality.

# GENDER AS POLITICS



These examples show how women and queer people's bodies are a political battleground.

Understanding gender as political helps us think about it as an issue that goes much deeper than the question of personal identification.

Seeing gender as a site of power that concerns us all - men, women and nonbinary people - and which reaches far beyond issues such as inequality between men and women and women's representation - the typical ways in which gender is discussed - is the main message for today!

## **II: INVENTING GENDER**

So, how should we explain gender?

# GENDER IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED



It is important to understand that gender is what sociologists call a social construction.

The gender theorist, Judith Butler, here describes the non-biological nature of gender roles.

Gender is neither inevitable nor natural. It has been constructed within a particular context: historical, geographical, cultural and political.

Although we might think that being a man and being a woman is defined by our biology, gender is a fluid construct.

It is not determined by our biology, but is actually a product of our environment, our performance (how we wear our gender), our choices, and our society.

Our society sets up gender as a binary: masculine and feminine. But nothing is genetically inherent in men to make them masculine, or in women to make them feminine.

Global variations in behaviour and expectations show that gender is a cultural construct.

# GENDER IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED

## *The Other Sociologist:*

- **Sex:** the biological traits that societies use to assign people into the category of either male or female.
- **Gender:** a concept that describes how societies determine and manage sex categories; the cultural meanings attached to men and women's roles; and how individuals understand their identities including, but not limited to, being a man, woman, transgender, intersex, gender queer and other gender positions.
- ***Sex and gender do not always align.***



Zuleyka Zevallos (The Other Sociologist) explains:

Sex refers to the biological traits that societies use to assign people into the category of either male or female.

Gender is a concept that describes how societies determine and manage sex categories; the cultural meanings attached to men and women's roles; and how individuals understand their identities including, but not limited to, being a man, woman, transgender, intersex, gender queer and other gender positions.

Sex and gender do not always align. Furthermore, researchers have questioned the idea that while sex is fixed, gender is fluid. From a purely chromosomal (biological) perspective, neither sex nor gender are set in stone. While most people may feel comfortable with the gender they are assigned at birth, there is nothing that de facto links your external anatomy to your identity.

For example, the picture of the transgender father carrying his baby shows that both sex and gender are socially constructed.

## **References:**

Zuleyka Zevallos, The Sociology of Gender. <https://othersociologist.com/sociology-of-gender/>

# **GENDER AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM**

**‘GENDER IS THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS THAT CENTRES ON THE REPRODUCTIVE ARENA, AND THE SET OF PRACTICES (GOVERNED BY THIS STRUCTURE) THAT BRING REPRODUCTIVE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN BODIES INTO SOCIAL PROCESSES. TO PUT IT INFORMALLY, GENDER CONCERNS THE WAY HUMAN SOCIETY DEALS WITH HUMAN BODIES, AND THE MANY CONSEQUENCES OF THAT “DEAL” IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES AND OUR COLLECTIVE FATE.’**

**RAEWYNN CONNELL (2015)**

Above all, we need to understand gender as a system which is used to organise society through creating roles for people according to where they have been assigned within the gender hierarchy.

Today, we accept that there are particular roles that are more suitable for men or for women. We might fight for more women to be permitted to work in traditionally male jobs or to normalise men as carers, or doing their share of the housework. But we should question what were the circumstances in which these roles came to assigned to men or women and what function dividing us according to gender served (especially after the growth of capitalism).

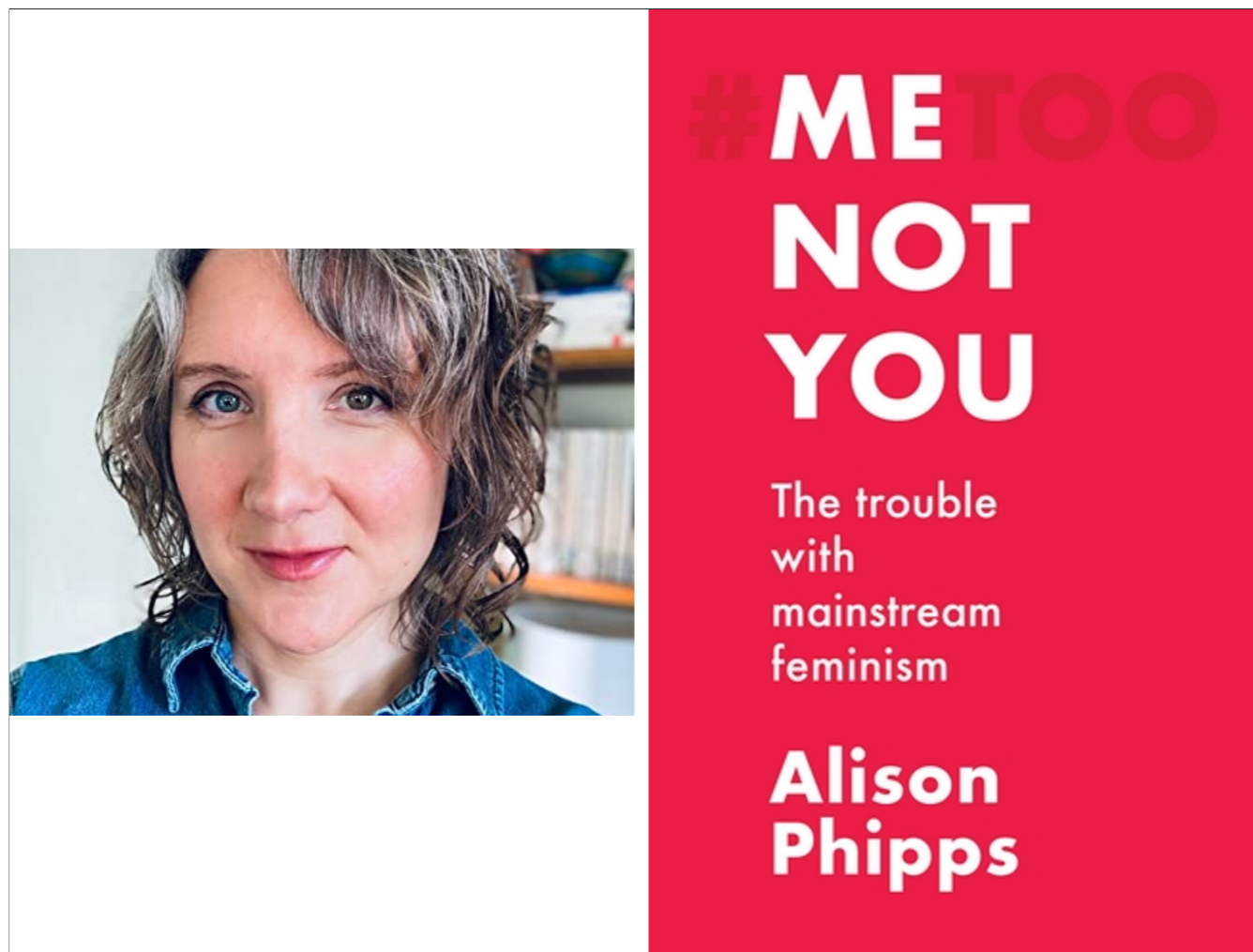
## **References:**

R. Connell (2015) Gender: An Introduction. Cambridge: Polity.

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**WHAT ARE SOME THE TRAITS ASSOCIATED  
WITH MASCULINITY OR FEMININITY**

# **III: APPROACHES TO GENDER**



Professor of Sociology and expert of gender and sexual violence, Alison Phipps, author of the book 'Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism' gave an interview for our class.

In it, she introduces two ways of thinking about gender which help us to understand how gender evolved as a binary system built around two opposing genders, man and woman. As she explains, this system evolves under precise historical conditions, some of which we have already been learning about - capitalism and colonialism in particular.

Let's listen to the first part of Alison's interview and then drill down into these two approaches: social reproduction and the colonality of gender.

This interview series is a Politics, Power and Resistance project brought to you by Alana Lentin.

Western Sydney University operates on the unceded lands of the Darug, Tharawal, Eora and Wiradjuri nations.

## Video

Summary:

Gender is:

1. A structural binary (economic, social, cultural)
2. A spectrum of different identities
3. A political device

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**WHAT ARE THE 3 WAYS IN WHICH WE CAN THINK  
ABOUT GENDER ACCORDING TO ALISO PHIPPS**

# **SOCIAL REPRODUCTION**

As Alison remarks, although gender has a longer history, capitalism brought about a change in approach to gender by separating between economic production and reproduction. The aim of reproduction becomes making future workers! Social reproduction then refers to the sphere in which the functioning of capitalism is ensured - the home. It is here that the worker is not only born, but also is fed, clothed and cared for, so that he (traditionally) can go out to work.



Social reproduction theories emphasise the unseen work done by women without which capitalist production would not function.

As Tithi Bhattacharya explains, social reproduction asks the question, ‘if workers produce commodities, who produces the worker?’

The answer is that “unpaid women’s work” has supported the continuation of production. The necessity of this domestic labour for all other labour to take place is what triggered the organisation of much second wave feminist campaigns around wages for housework - in order to show the extent to which capitalism is imbricated in and dependent upon unseen work.”

#### **References:**

Bhattacharya, T. (2017). *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*. Pluto Press.



In the 1970s, many women in western countries mobilised around the slogan, wages for housework.

If so-called 'women's work' - bringing up children, cleaning, cooking and so on - was so vital for the capitalist machine, then it should be treated as work and women should be paid!

The aim of course was not really to monetise housework, but to point out the extent of the importance of social reproduction for capitalism by quantifying it in dollar terms.

The Marxist feminist, Silvia Federici, said that the campaign should better have been called 'Wages Against Housework'.



“RACISM AND SEXISM TRAIN US TO DEVELOP AND ACQUIRE CERTAIN CAPABILITIES AT THE EXPENSE OF ALL OTHERS. THEN THESE ACQUIRED CAPABILITIES ARE TAKEN TO BE OUR **NATURE** AND FIX OUR FUNCTIONS FOR LIFE, AND FIX ALSO THE QUALITY OF OUR MUTUAL RELATIONS. SO **PLANTING CANE OR TEA IS NOT A JOB FOR WHITE PEOPLE AND CHANGING NAPPIES IS NOT A JOB FOR MEN** AND BEATING CHILDREN IS NOT VIOLENCE. RACE, SEX, AGE, NATION, EACH AN INDISPENSABLE ELEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOUR.”

**SELMA JAMES, SEX, RACE & CLASS, 1975**

The founder of Wages for Housework and author of the book *Sex, Race and Class* (pub 1975), Selma James, stressed the importance of looking at sex (today we would say gender) in relation to race and class. As Alison mentioned, these structures are interrelated.

She writes that the feminist movement in the 1970s learned about women and children's class position - as unwaged and unvalued subjects - from the Black movement. Looking at where you are positioned in the social hierarchy and the capitalist economy is vital for understanding how our social roles are connected to our capitalist functions.

This blows part the idea - as this quote shows - that we are destined by nature to do certain jobs, be it planting cane (for enslaved Black people) or changing nappies (for women).

However, we should be very careful not to equate enslavement with being a woman in general. White women were not subjected to slavery and often owned slaves themselves.

## References:

Selma James (1975) *Sex, Race and Class*. <https://libcom.org/article/sex-race-and-class-selma-james>



**The Nurse Maid (Biddy), Julie Dowling (1969)**

Further, class is important because not all women have to do domestic labour. Just as historically, Indigenous and Black women served as maids and wet-nurses to white women, so too today, middle and upper class women may have the opportunity to work, but that is based on working class and often Black and migrant women taking care of their children and their homes.

And, as Sara Farris has shown in her study of what she calls 'femonationalism' - the way feminism has been used to justify policies that police Muslim women in Europe - Muslim women have been encouraged to go out to work as a way of liberating themselves from what white feminists see as an oppressive home life. However, often, the only jobs available for them are domestic ones. So in order to receive state payments, they have to agree to go out to work looking after other peoples children or cleaning their houses, rather than having time to care for their own families.

### **References:**

Farris, Sara R. In the Name of Women's Rights: the Rise of Femonationalism. Durham, [North Carolina];: Duke University Press, 2017.

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# **GENDER, RACE AND CLASS, AND...**



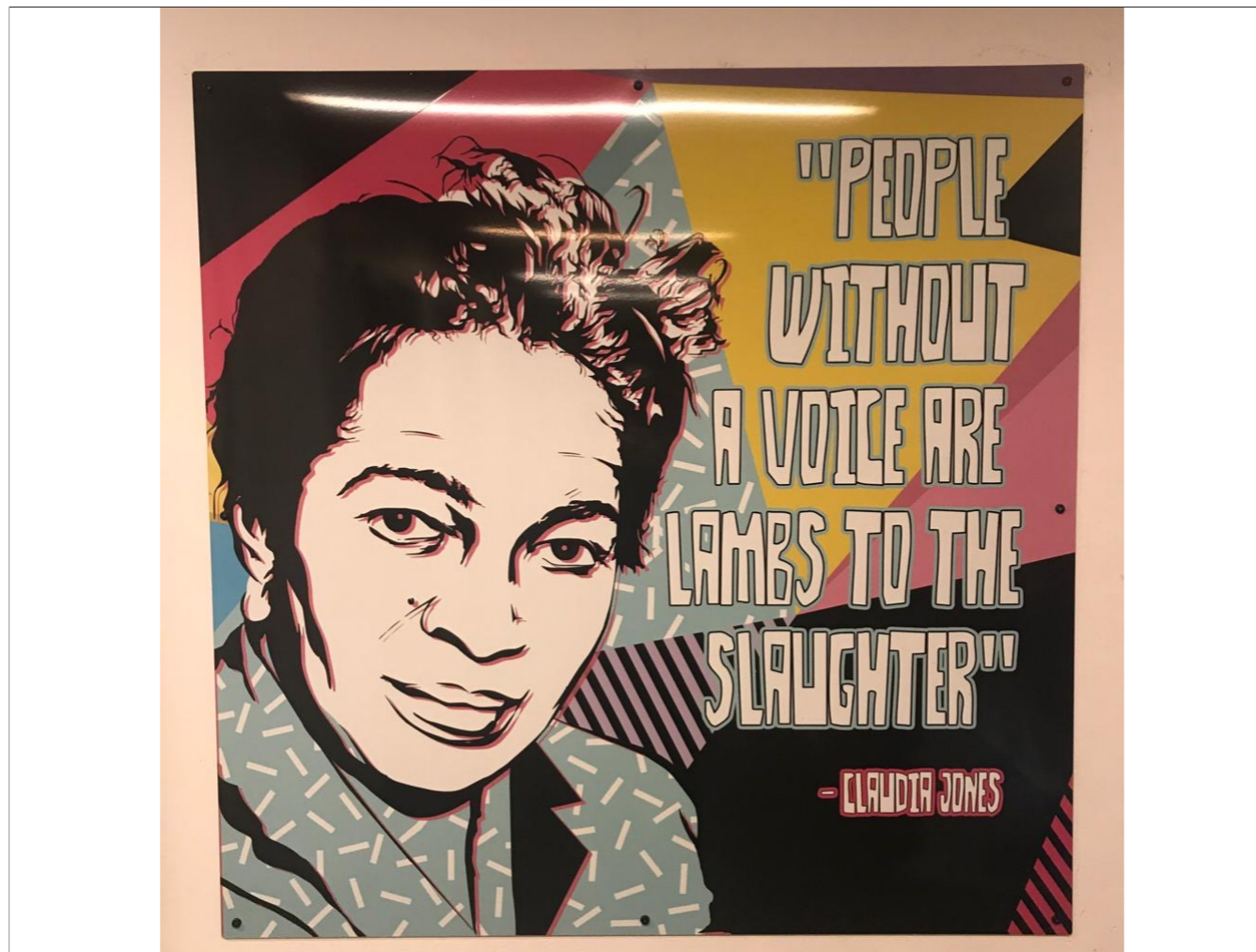
## **WOMEN, RACE & CLASS BY ANGELA DAVIS (1981)**

So, both class and race are important. As Black Communist activist and scholar, Angela Davis, showed in *Women, Race and Class*,

The role of Black women as workers, going back to the days of slavery in the US, needs to be understood to understand the division of labour between Black and White women to this day.

She shows,

- A) That both Black men and Black women's labour was exploited and continues to be
- B) That Black women held a different position to white women. White women were often barred from working and so struggled to be included in the labour force. But Black women have always HAD to work and so their struggle was against exploitation.
- C) That the workers' movement/trade union vision of the worker as a white man is false - the workforce has always been multiracial and multi-gendered.



Many people today use the term intersectionality to think about the relationship between different axes of domination - gender, class, race as well as sexual orientation and physical and mental ability.

The concept is usually attributed to the US- legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw, but it has much longer roots.

One important figure was the Trinidadian communist activist and writer, Claudia Jones, who was active in the mid 20th century.

Claudia Jones is credited with the idea of 'triple oppression'. She argued that Black women—"as workers, as Negroes, and as women"—were thus "the most oppressed stratum" in the United States.

In other words, in the case of Black women, class, race and gender were all in play, and equal attention to all of these three levels of domination was important for having a fuller picture of what it would take for Black women to be more free.

She showed how Black women had to work to make up for the low wages of Black men; something white women did not have to do. And when white women did enter the labor market, their wages were significantly higher than Black women's.

Black women's "super-exploitation" had knock on effects for the health and wellbeing of Black children and the entire Black family.

#### **References:**

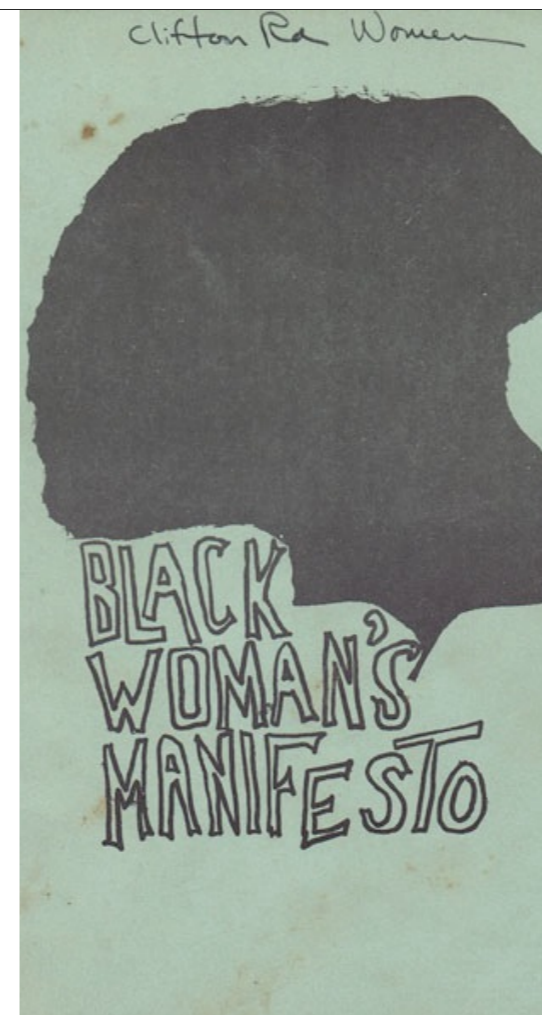
<https://www.aaihs.org/claudia-jones-and-ending-the-neglect-of-black-women/>



# THE COMBAHEE RIVER STATEMENT

“WE OFTEN FIND IT DIFFICULT TO  
SEPARATE RACE FROM CLASS FROM SEX  
OPPRESSION BECAUSE IN OUR LIVES  
THEY ARE MOST OFTEN EXPERIENCED  
SIMULTANEOUSLY. WE KNOW THAT  
THERE IS SUCH A THING AS RACIAL-  
SEXUAL OPPRESSION WHICH IS NEITHER  
SOLELY RACIAL NOR SOLELY SEXUAL.”

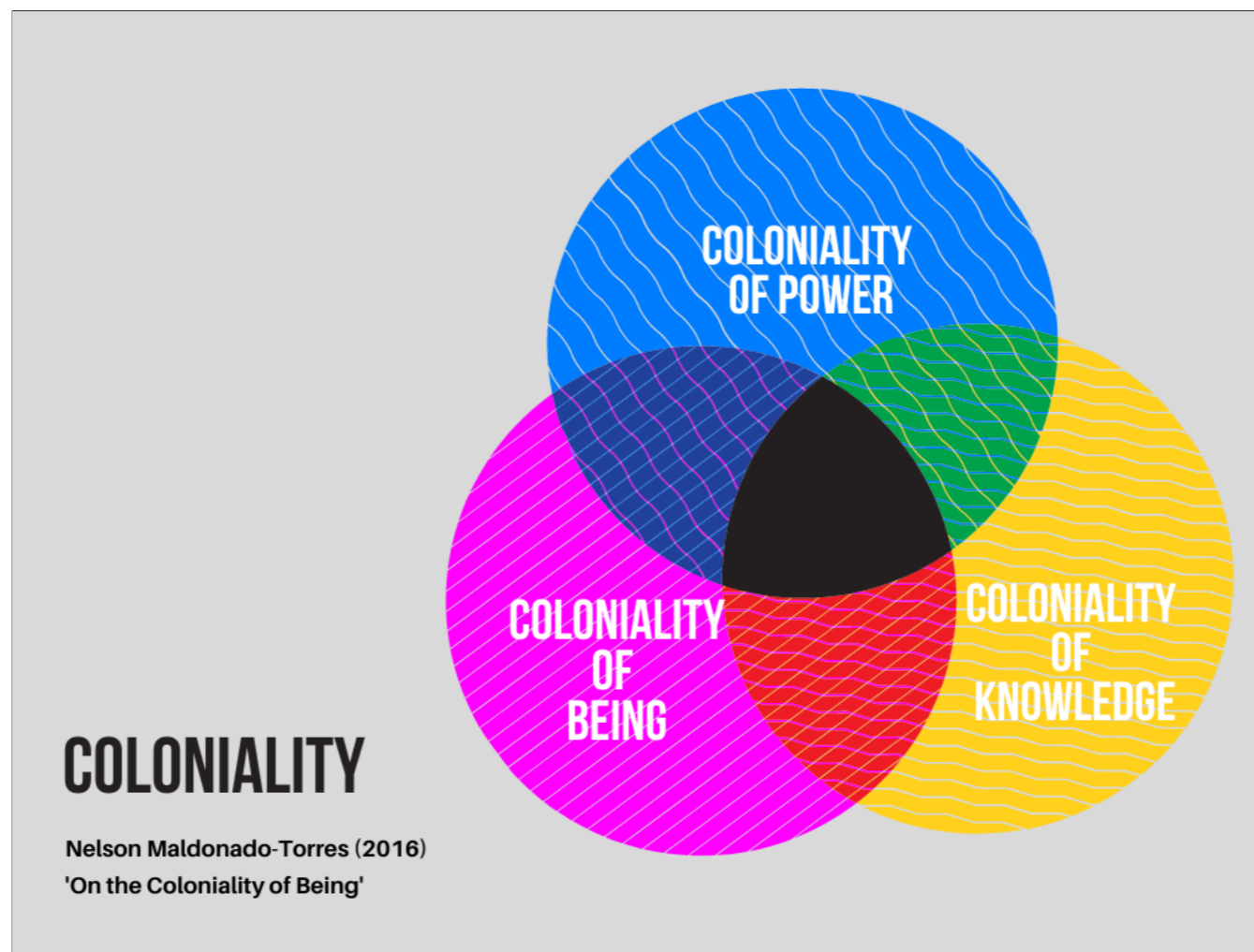
‘A BLACK FEMINIST STATEMENT’, COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE,  
1977)



In 1977, a group of Black socialist lesbian feminists met and drafted the Combahee River statement. The statement came out of the activism of Black women such as Claudia Jones. It too placed the link between gender, race and class at the core of their analysis and activism. Each structure is responsible for shaping the other.

There is no one way of being a woman - a single sisterhood. Rather, there are multiple ways of being women that are shaped by one's class and raced position. There is also no essence of womanhood. Therefore, from this perspective, transgender women are women.

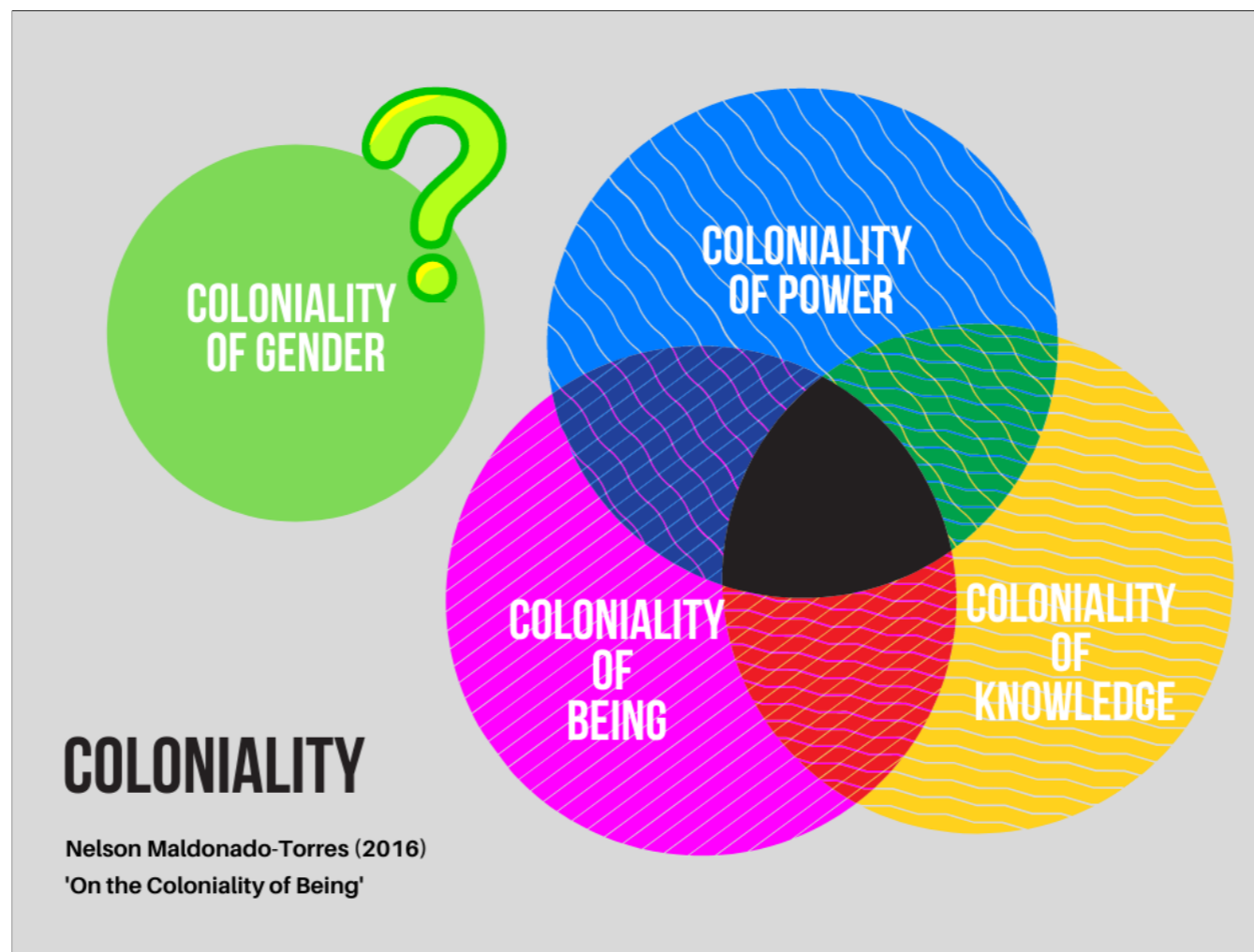
# **THE COLONIALITY OF GENDER**



In Week 3 we looked at the coloniality of power. An idea developed by the Peruvian thinker, Anibal Quijano, it is a way of thinking about global power over the last 500 years since 1492, and how coloniality continues to shape the world despite the official end of colonialism.

You will remember, I introduced this useful graph by Nelson Maldonado-Torres to show how the coloniality of power intersects with these other two dimensions - knowledge and being.

Quijano writes that the imposition of the European family onto the majority of the world was fundamental to the development of what he calls the modern-colonial world system. So, as this relates to the issue of reproduction, we would assume that gender would be an important lens for the decolonial thinkers.



Sadly, mainly male decolonial thinkers have neglected gender except in passing.

But women such as Argentinian scholar, Maria Lugones, Silvia Tamale from Uganda and the Nigerian gender studies scholar Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí among others have played a vital role in looking at the role of gender in coloniality.



# COLONIALITY OF GENDER

The late Argentinian philosopher Maria Lugones theorised gender itself as colonial.

She said that under colonisation, Europeans imposed the gender binary system - an understanding of gender as having two sides: male and female, opposed to each other.

Before this there was no understanding in non-European societies of binary gender. All kinds of genders existed.

Normative European visions of what it meant to be a man and what it meant to be a woman were imposed on Indigenous people along with the idea of the heterosexual couple unit.

Because they did not conform to the strict ideas about the gender divide that Europeans had, their humanity was put into question. This connects to our discussion in Week 3 about the coloniality of being - to be human, in the European sense - meant also to be either a man or a woman. Lugones explains that, because Indigenous people did not conform to European gender roles, they were not seen as really human. Therefore, colonised women were seen as not being women.

So, colonised people are not only oppressed by colonisation and the racism that accompanied it, they are also oppressed by the gender system which forces them into gender roles.

Christianity played a big role in this, by imposing highly gendered roles on people and turning their Indigenous practices into sinful acts.



What this means in practice is that violence and mistreatment could be justified. For example, Black women under slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean were seen only as vessels to reproduce the next generation of enslaved people.

But as historian Stella Dadzie writes in her book on the everyday resistances of enslaved women, they always fought back.

### **References:**

Dadzie, S. (2021). *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery and Resistance*. Verso.



‘THIS ENCOUNTER OF TWO PEOPLES THUS BROUGHT ABOUT INTIMATE VIOLENCE TO ALMOST EVERY ASPECT OF HOW INDIGENOUS WOMEN GO ABOUT THEIR LIVES.’

UCHCHA-A CHAK

Violence against Indigenous women was used - and continue to be used - as a means of policing their improper gender behaviour.

An Indigenous Chak women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh, Uchcha-A Chak, writes about how women from her community in the 1970s were demeaned by men from the dominant Bengali culture for wearing traditional short skirts or for bathing naked in the river. Women responded by doubling the lengths of their skirts and conforming to expectations of modest behaviour from dominant society.

As Chak remarks, at this time the Bangladeshi nation was imposing what she calls ‘heavy-handed’ nationalist agendas in the Chittagong Hill tracts through various means including transferring the population from the plains to the hills, bringing two different groups with difference cultural expectations into confrontation with each other.

In other words, attacks on women and the use of gender as a way of power and control is always connected to other political agendas, in this case nationalism.

#### References:

Chak, U. (2021, December 8). Indigenous Women and the Coloniality of Gender. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/indigenous-women-and-the-coloniality-gender-2912166>

As she remarks, ‘This encounter of two peoples thus brought about intimate violence to almost every aspect of how indigenous women go about their lives.’

In other words, very often policing women and gender diverse people serves as higher purpose - to impose order and control through violence.

It is to the origins of this that we now turn.

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## **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS IN WHICH GENDER IS USED A TOOL OF POWER**

- Imposing particular gender roles
- Organising society via the family unit
- Compulsory heterosexuality
- Regulating reproduction and the body
- Punishing lack of conformity

## **IV: GENDER AS A SITE OF VIOLENCE**

What we can already see is that not conforming to particular ways of doing gender is used as a means of power and control. This is what Alison Phipps means by gender being a political device.

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In this part of the interview, Alison Phipps introduces the the operations of sexual violence and its importance for maintaining gender norms. Thinking about why violence is necessary for imposing and keeping gender in check, helps us to make sense of why gender as a social structure is above all about power and control.

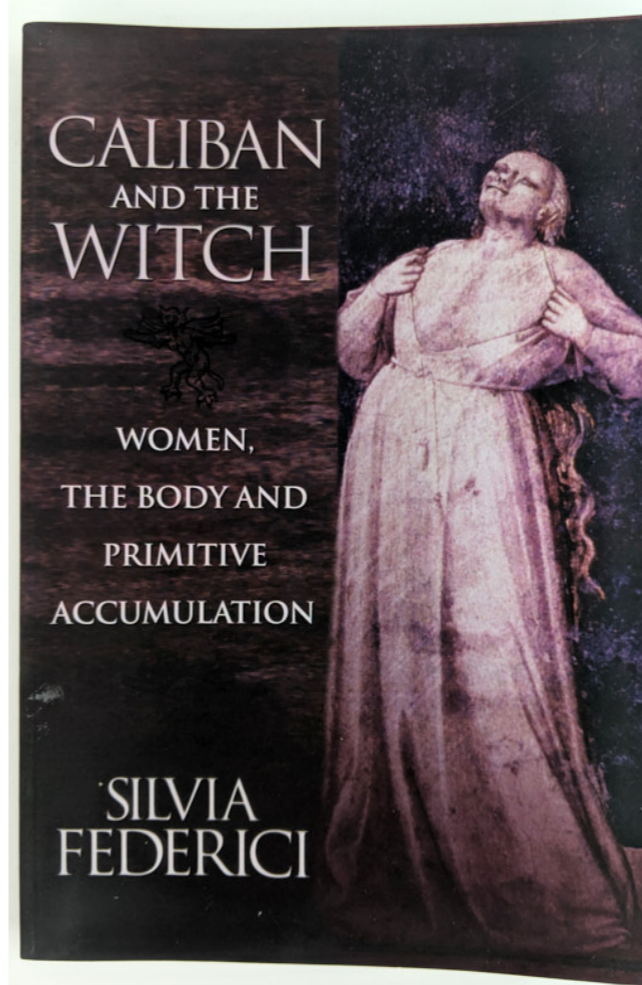
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**WHAT ARE THE FOUR MODES THROUGH WHICH  
SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS OPERATIONALISED**

Question: What are the four modes through which sexual violence is operationalised?

Answer: Threats, acts. Imputations, punishments.



**'CAPITALIST  
DEVELOPMENT BEGAN  
WITH A WAR ON WOMEN.'**  
SILVIA FEDERICI (2018: 47)



Alison mentions the work of Silvia Federici whose analysis helps us to understand the origins of sexual violence and the significance of gender as a structure of power for installing and maintaining the capitalist system.

Understanding this history helps us to challenge the idea of the gender binary as something that is natural and universal.

#### **References:**

Federici, S. (2018). *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*. PM Press.

Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Illustrated ed.). Autonomedia.



In her book *Witches, Witch-hunting and Women*, Silvia Federici expands on the argument of her classic book, *Caliban and the Witch*.

The history of witch-hunts in the Europe of the Middle Ages is a fundamental piece of the puzzle in understanding the development of early capitalism. The control of women and the regulation of gender then becomes crucial to the expansion of capitalism on a global scale, through colonialism and imperialism.

So, this piece of the puzzle is important to add to the analysis we began all the way back in Week 2 of the semester when we looked at capitalism.

Federici argues that witch hunts served to destroy 'a universe of female subjects and practices that stood in the way of the main requirements of the developing capitalist system', that is the imposition of a constrained system of labour; when people were no longer free to organise their own work for feeding themselves and their family, but began to have to work for the enrichment of others.

By naming women as 'witches' and persecuting them as dangerous and demonic, it was possible to strip women of their autonomy and confine them to unpaid domestic labour. In this way, the witch hunts are fundamental to the development of what we explained earlier as 'social reproduction'.

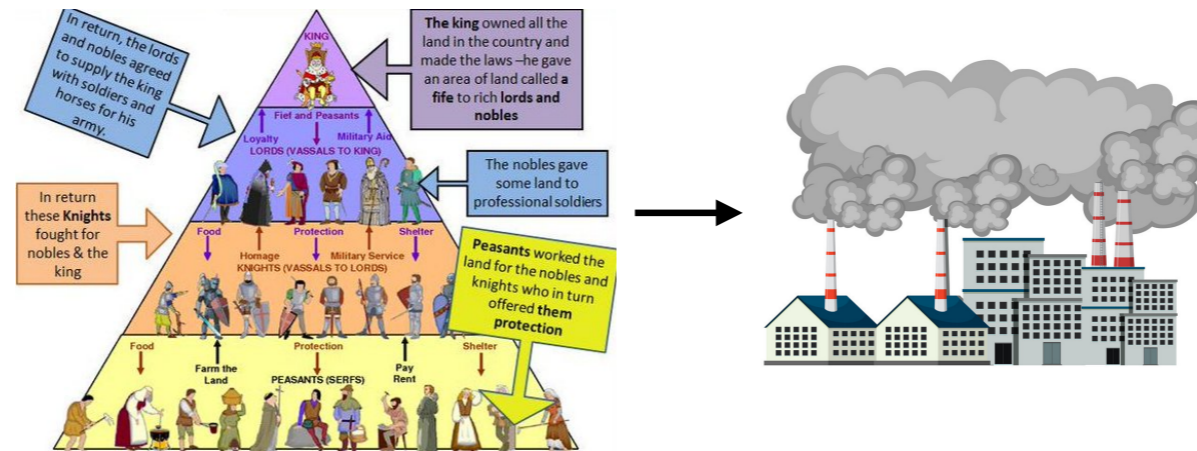


Federici ask, 'How does one explain that for 3 centuries, thousands of women in Europe became the personification of 'the enemy within' and absolute evil? (2018: 24)

The women who were persecuted as witches were often midwives or healers. They were frequently older women who did not have families to protect them, and poor women who, stripped of the ability to earn a living using their old knowledges, were often forced to beg.

RECALLING WEEK 2...

# AFTER FEUDALISM



This slide is from my lecture in Week 2.

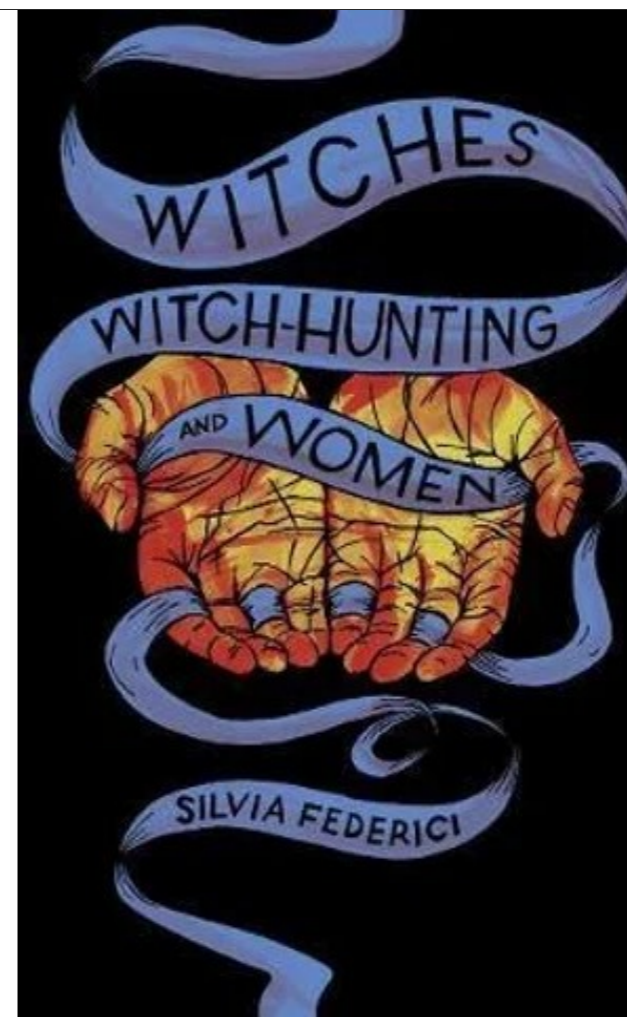
I mentioned the significance of the 'enclosure movement' in England between 1450-1640 during which common land - land that could be used by all people - was seized and fenced off and turned into private plots.

Federici writes that it was in this context that witch-hunts began.

With enclosure, people saw rising prices and a loss of rights which saw older women especially being left with nothing to live on. Until this point widows had the right to access food, wood and sustenance, but as early capitalism led to everything coming with a price, these rights were taken away. So, needing to rely on begging, the women were effectively criminalised.

**'WITCHES WERE  
NOT ONLY VICTIMS.  
THEY WERE WOMEN  
WHO RESISTED  
THEIR  
IMPOVERISHMENT  
AND SOCIAL  
EXCLUSION.'**

FEDERICI (2018: 18)



Federici reminds us that a key reason that women were persecuted as 'witches' was because they fought back against their oppression. They were charged with being 'quarrelsome' and 'stirring up trouble with neighbours'.

Crucially, women were also charged with being sexually transgressive, and as being involved in 'lewd' or 'promiscuous behaviour'.

She might have been a healer or a midwife or a practitioner of magic. All of these ways of being posed a 'danger o the local and national power structure'.

We can see that, just as in the case of the Chak people in Bangladesh, the idea of immodest and sexual impropriety is a way to discipline and punish women.

Silvia Federici's point is that the wider context for this - the development of capitalism - is crucial. Women could not work autonomously outside the capitalist system. They could not be allowed to take their own living as healers or midwives, nor could they expect anything for free. Their only role was in the home, restricted to reproducing the future generation of workers and creating the domestic conditions necessary for the capitalist machinery to grind on.

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**WHO WERE THE WOMEN CRIMINALISED AS  
'WITCHES'**

# STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

As Federici writes in Chapter 6 of *Witches, Witch-Hunts and Women*, violence against women did not end with the witch-hunts but continues to this day and has become intensified.

We tend to think about violence against women as interpersonal. We use the phrase domestic violence which implies that women mainly suffer violence within the home. While the home is a major site for violence, what we need to do is to understand the external structures that enable this violence.

To a great extent, the state provides the framework for enabling violence against women to be perpetuated. There are many reasons for this, including the existence of misogynistic laws and policies which make it very difficult for women to seek justice when they are the victims of sexual violence. The imposition of the family structure as the only legitimate mode of social organisation and the punishment of single mothers in particular by the welfare system, is a key way in which the state participates in upholding the conditions of violence against women.

However, it is also important to understand the state itself as enacting violence against women and queer people.

## CARCERAL SOLUTIONS TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

'INDIGENOUS WOMEN ARE FREQUENTLY THE VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AND MAY BE STUCK IN A CYCLE BETWEEN VICTIMISATION AND OFFENDING. THIS CAN CREATE DANGEROUS SITUATIONS WHEREBY THEY ARE FEARFUL TO CONTACT POLICE DURING INCIDENCE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE. WHEN POLICE ATTEND THESE INCIDENTS THEY MAY CHARGE THE WOMEN WITH ASSAULT, BASED ON HER ATTEMPTS TO DEFEND HERSELF. SIMILARLY, IF SHE HAS PRE-EXISTING CHARGES WHICH HAVE NOT BEEN RESOLVED THEN SHE MAY BE ARRESTED ALSO.'

DEBBIE KILROY, SISTERS INSIDE (CITED IN MCQUIRE, 2016)



One of the ways the state perpetuates violence is through the imposition of what are called 'carceral solutions'. We will explore this further in Week 11. A carceral solution refers to the use of the legal system and ultimately of prisons as the only way to punish violence.

Many feminists call for tougher sentences for men who perpetrate violence against women. However, Indigenous women and Black women in particular have warned against the use of prisons to solve the problem of violence. The reason for this is that prisons themselves are violent institutions. The perpetuate and embed violence rather than solving it.

As the abolitionist campaigning organisation Sisters Inside - which acts on behalf of incarcerated women - have written, calling the police cannot be the only response to violence. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women will often not call the police when they face domestic violence because they often end up getting criminalised themselves.

This was the case of Ms Dhu, a 22 year old Aboriginal woman from Western Australia. Ms Dhu, died in police custody in 2013 after a doctor diagnosed her with 'behavioural issues'. Ms Dhu was arrested for unpaid fines. But she originally called the police because she had been a victim of domestic violence. This led to an infection in her ribs which was what she died from because the prison refused to treat her.

As Amy McQuire writes, Aboriginal women are the fastest growing incarcerated group in AU. They are often scared to report family violence because they often end up getting arrested or jailed despite being victims.

### References:

<https://newmatilda.com/2016/04/15/a-tale-of-two-royal-commissions/>

<https://www.sistersinside.com.au/in-no-uncertain-terms-the-violence-of-criminalising-coercive-control-joint-statement-sisters-inside-institute-for-collaborative-race-research/>

**'THE STATE IS THE ASSUMED AGENT OF REDRESS AND PROTECTION FOR WOMEN. IN THE CASE OF COLONIAL AUSTRALIA, WE KNOW THIS TO BE UNTRUE. FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES NATIVE POLICE, MISSION CONTROLS, CHILD REMOVAL SYSTEMS, INCARCERATION IN DORMITORIES, POLICE HARASSMENT, DEATHS IN CUSTODY AND HYPER INCARCERATION IN THE PRISON SYSTEM HAVE BEEN A CENTRAL MECHANISM OF INDIGENOUS DISPOSSESSION AND COLONIAL CONTROL. THIS TRAUMATIC AND POLITICISED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM CONTINUES TODAY. '**

**SISTERS INSIDE & INSTITUTE FOR COLLABORATIVE RACE RESEARCH (2021)**

As a joint report by Sisters Inside and the Institute for Collaborative Race Research in Queensland notes, the tendency to turn to the state to redress gender and sexual violence is problematic, especially when it comes to Indigenous women, because the state itself has enacted and continues to enact violence against women in multiple ways.

This includes incarceration, the taking of children and the breaking up of Indigenous families. The police, the legal system and the welfare system have worked together since early colonial times to police the Indigenous family. The effect is to embed and reinforce violence, not to reduce it.

We will be looking at this in greater detail in Weeks 11 and 12.

#### **References:**

'In no uncertain terms' the violence of criminalising coercive control. Joint statement: Sisters Inside & Institute for Collaborative Race Research, May 17, 2021. <https://www.sistersinside.com.au/in-no-uncertain-terms-the-violence-of-criminalising-coercive-control-joint-statement-sisters-inside-institute-for-collaborative-race-research/>

# **GLOBAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Silvia Federici argues that violence against women across the world has grown in scale in recent years in a context of greater and greater inequality brought about by globalised capitalism.



Federici: it is not surprising that violence against women, especially Afro-descendant and Indigenous women, is increasing in areas that are rich in natural resources, be it in Africa, Asia or Latin America. This picture depicts Mura Indigenous people in a deforested area in Brazil, a process being accelerated by the policies of Brazil's right-wing leader, Jair Bolsonaro (who relatedly has attacked the teaching of gender studies).

For Federici, the violence against women in these area is equivalent to the 'new enclosures'. It serves in carrying out 'land grabs, privatisations and wars' in regions rich in minerals and other resources by mining and petroleum companies.

### References:

Katie Surma, Inside Climate News. (2021, June 24). Bolsonaro should be tried for crimes against humanity, Indigenous leaders say. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/bolsonaro-should-be-tried-crimes-against-humanity-indigenous-leaders-say-n1272193>



Federici details the extremity of the violence meted out to women. But she argues it would be wrong to see this as purely a matter of individual male brutality. Rather, this violence is enabled by the policies - national and international - that allow for the domination by private companies, determined to strip the earth of its natural resources for their enrichment at all costs.

The bidding of these companies is often done by armies and militias.

These acts of violence, as Federici writes, must be 'planned, calculated and performed with the utmost guarantee of immunity, in the same way as mining companies today pollute lands, rivers, and streams with deadly chemicals with total immunity, while the people who live off these resources are imprisoned by security guards if they dare to resist.'

Meting out violence to women is a way to strike at the heart of a community's ability to resist. As Federici says, it sends a message because of 'what women represent in their capacity to keep their communities together and... to defend non-commercial connections of security and wealth.'

Just as in the Middle Ages in Europe, witchcraft accusations today are rife in parts of Africa and India, especially in areas that have been designated for land privatisation (e.g. in tribal lands in India).



Unemployment, and precarious work is another context for violence against women.

Women are often at the brunt of male frustration due to poverty. Federici writes about the prevalence of 'dowry murders' in India where 'middle class men kill their wives if they do not bring enough assets with them' (p. 53).

Rape is another mechanism of control over women's bodies that has always been a key arm of war and colonisation.

Misogyny - hatred of women - according to Federici, is often a response to women's greater economic autonomy, and the rise of feminist activism.

# **V: FEMINIST ACTION FOR JUSTICE**

This brings us to the question of how women are responding to gendered oppression and sexual violence.

We will focus on this in our tutorial discussions, via Alison Phipps' interview, where she answers the question of how campaigners are resisting sexual violence.

But for now, let's focus on one example, mentioned by Alison in the interview, Sisters Uncut.



In 2021, an off duty police officer -Wayne Cousins - murdered a woman named Sarah Everard in London. A protest was organised to speak out about the culture of police violence targeting women.



At the protest, police silently attacked women who were protesting.



Sisters Uncut called out the police response that Sarah Everard's killer had been a 'bad apple, a lone monster'.

In a statement, they wrote that other police used the nickname 'the rapist' for Wayne Couzens, the man who murdered Sarah, but they did nothing to stop him despite him sending 'vile misogynistic racist and homophobic messages to colleagues on WhatsApp.... We know that even after Couzens pled guilty, colleague attended court to provide positive character references for him.'

The wider context for this is that in the UK, at least 15 women have been killed by police officer since 2009. There have also been over 700 reports of domestic violence made against police officers between 2015 and 2018.

Similarly to Sisters Inside here in Australia, Sisters Uncut has been leading the way in making the point that more policing does not solve the problem of violence against women, because police and policing as an institution perpetuates violence; it doesn't solve it.



It is important to end by noting that, although much of my focus has been on violence against women, movements such as Sisters Uncut insist on their feminism being inclusive of all women, including transgender women.

The movement protesting violence against women of campaigning groups such as Sisters Uncut recognises that violence against women is produced because of the intrinsic violence of gender as a system of power and domination. The system of gender imposes strict roles onto us as either men or women and on this basis perpetuates violence.

Next week, we will be listening to a guest lecture by Dr Lana Tatour on activism led by queer people in Palestine. In this context, we will focus more on how homophobia and transphobia too are a major axis of gendered domination and violence, and how people are joining together to resist it.

# SUMMARY

- Gender is a political device
- Gender is an economic, social and cultural structural binary
- Gender also refers to a spectrum of different identities
- Social reproduction refers to the sphere of unpaid, domestic labour needed to uphold capitalism
- Gender is colonially constructed
- Black socialist feminism: All women do not have the same life experiences 'as women'
- Sexual and gender violence is a crucial arm of capitalist accumulation
- Feminist movements are rising up to oppose state and carceral violence affecting women and gender diverse people