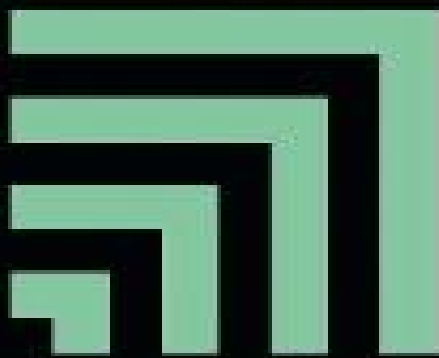


AGAINST

WHITE

'This is,
quite simply, a
transformative
book'
MERVE EMRE

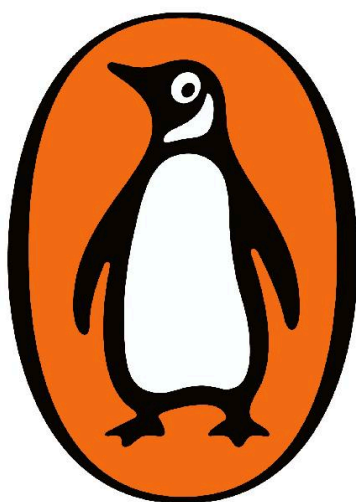
FEMINISM



'Unputdownable, required
reading for people of all genders,
generations and races'
ZAHRA HANKIR

RAFIA ZAKARIA





Rafia Zakaria

AGAINST WHITE FEMINISM



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To Rania, my bright and shining star

Author's Note

A white feminist is someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played, and continue to play, in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas and beliefs as those of all of feminism and all feminists. You do not have to be white to be a white feminist. It is also perfectly possible to be white and feminist and not be a white feminist. The term describes a set of assumptions and behaviours which have been baked into mainstream Western feminism, rather than describing the racial identity of its subjects. At the same time, it is true that most white feminists are indeed white, and that whiteness itself is at the core of white feminism.

A white feminist may be someone who earnestly salutes the precepts of 'intersectionality' – the need for feminism to reflect structural inequalities drawn along the lines of race, faith, class, disability, etc., as well as gender – but fails to cede space to the feminists of colour who have been ignored, erased or excluded from the feminist movement. White feminists can attend civil rights marches, have friends who are women of colour, and in some cases be women of colour themselves, and yet be devoted to organizational structures or systems of knowledge that ensure that non-white women's experiences – and thus their needs and priorities – remain sidelined. More broadly, to be a white feminist you simply have to be a person who accepts the benefits conferred by white supremacy at the expense of people of colour, while claiming to support gender equality and solidarity with 'all' women.

This book is a critique of whiteness within feminism; it is directed at pointing out what must be excised, what must be broken down, in order for something new – something better – to take its place. It explains why interventions that simply add non-white women to existing structures have not worked. Because it is a critique, it has not been possible to present the

diversity of views that exist among and between feminists of colour. Others are doing this work, but for that effort to be given its due, this project of dismantling a white-centred history and practice has to be undertaken. This book examines what 'whiteness' has enabled within the feminist movement; similar work can and must be done on how cis-heteronormativity, ableism, class privilege and other forms of privilege act within mainstream feminism.

The goal here is not to expel white women from feminism, but to excise 'whiteness', with all its assumptions of privilege and superiority, so as to foster the freedom and empowerment of all women.

Introduction: At a Wine Bar, a Group of Feminists

It is a warm fall evening and I am at a Manhattan wine bar with five other women. The mood is warm and cheerful. Two of the women are writers and journalists, like myself, and the other three work in the media or the publishing industry. Everyone, except for me, is white. I am excited to have been included this evening, eager to impress and befriend these women I have previously only known professionally through phone calls and emails.

The first hurdle comes when the waiter comes to take our order. ‘Let’s split a pitcher of sangria!’ someone says, and everyone agrees excitedly; then they turn to me, looking for agreement.

‘I’m on some medications, but please, you guys go ahead – I’ll drink vicariously through you,’ I declare with a smile whose wattage aims to cover up the discomfort, my own and theirs. It is the truth, but I feel ashamed saying it. They know that I am Muslim and I imagine them wondering if I am too uptight to belong among them. ‘It’s not a religious thing,’ I add once the waiter is gone. ‘You have no idea how much I would love a glass right now.’ There is laughter all around the table. Now I worry that the laughter is forced and that this audition to belong is already over.

The second hurdle arrives a little later, when everyone except me has been softened by sangria and is exchanging personal stories, bonding in the way you’re supposed to at a wine bar in Manhattan on a warm fall evening. I see it coming when one of the women, a noted feminist author, looks at me mischievously. ‘So, Rafia ... what’s your story?’ she asks conspiratorially, as if I’ve been hiding some tantalizing mystery.

‘Yeah,’ one of the others, an editor at a literary journal, chimes in. ‘How did you even come here ... like, to America?’

It is a question I detest so much that I once used it in a stand-up comedy set. I am performing now too, but I know a comedic response won’t do; will seem like too much of a deflection. But I am prepared for this moment, not

least because it has proven tricky to navigate so many times before. Often (as I dramatized in the stand-up routine) I offer up a few white lies. I tell people I came to America when I was eighteen to go to college and then stayed.

It is only two-thirds of a lie. The truth is, I came to America as a young bride. One night after dinner, sitting on the edge of my bed in mid-nineties Karachi, I agreed to an arranged marriage. I was seventeen; my husband, thirteen years older and a Pakistani-American doctor, had promised to ‘allow’ me to go to college once we were married. There were other reasons why I said yes, but the possibility of going to college in the United States, something that my conservative family would never have allowed (or been able to afford), was a major factor. My life until then had been constrained in all sorts of ways, hardly extending beyond the walls that surrounded our home. I had never experienced freedom, so I gladly signed it away.

Arriving in the United States, I moved directly to Nashville, Tennessee. There I attended a Southern Baptist college (when it was still closely affiliated with the Church, and where exhortations promising fire and brimstone for all non-Baptists were commonplace), which my new husband had selected and enrolled me in and which I was to pay for via student loans. After graduating college, I begged him for permission to go to law school, to which I had applied, earning a partial scholarship. He refused, then relented, then ‘changed his mind’, reminding me that his marital promise had been to let me attend college, *not* law school.

The transactional nature of our relationship stared out at me. The next seven years did not change things for the better. During our last fight, the police officer who arrived on the scene took his cue from my suddenly calm and courteous husband and told me to ‘patch it up’. It was only much later that I learned that this is what police officers tell women who look to them for help, all the time.

I did not ‘patch it up’; I spent the night clutching my sleeping toddler. The next day, after my husband left to do his morning rounds at the hospital, I took her, a small suitcase of clothes, a box of toys and an inflatable mattress, and drove to a domestic violence shelter, an unmarked and unknown house. A woman with blonde hair and bright blue eyeshadow led me there. ‘Just follow my car,’ she told me when we met at a Kmart

parking lot; and I did, the Barney theme song playing on a loop inside my car to keep my daughter quiet.

I calculate the costs of telling the abbreviated version of my story to the literary drinks group. Even if I added a few details, the redacted version would seem curt, closeted. Telling secrets is the material of friendships; I could begin to weave that fabric now, encompassing them in the warp and weft of my story.

But I feel I cannot give them the unedited version. The truth of that ordeal, and what I endured afterwards in my struggle to make a life of my own as a young single mother, seems glaringly inappropriate for the wine bar and my prettily dressed, slightly soused, fashionably woke companions. I have told the whole truth to such women before and the reaction has always been the same. There is the widening of eyes, the looks of seriousness and shock, the hands over mouths, the arms slung around my shoulders. When I finish there is genuine sympathy, a fervent digging around in their own imaginations for some similar story – an aunt, a friend, a personal connection to violence. Then one of two things happens.

If I am lucky, someone makes a joke or suggests a toast and we move on to another topic, which I eagerly take up. More often, there is an uncomfortable silence as everyone stares at the table or at their drinks. Then a grabbing of purses and phones and a smattering of reasons to leave amid declarations of ‘this has been so good’ and ‘we should do this again’ and ‘thank you for sharing your story’. The words are well meant but the tone is unmistakable. I don’t remember ever ‘doing this again’.

I know why. An aversion to acknowledging lived trauma permeates white feminism, which in turn produces a discomfort towards and an alienation from women who have experienced it. I’ve sensed it every time I have found myself in such a conversation, but have only recently been able to recognize its connection to unexplored assumptions of the value of the voices that have experienced trauma.

By and large, there is a division within feminism that is not spoken of but that has remained seething beneath the surface for years. It is the division between the women who write and speak feminism and the women who live it; the women who have a voice versus the women who have experience; the ones who make the theories and policies, and the ones who bear scars and sutures from the fight. While this dichotomy does not always

trace racial divides, it is true that, by and large, the women who are paid to write about feminism, lead feminist organizations and make feminist policy in the Western world are white and middle-class. These are our pundits, our ‘experts’, who know or at least claim to know what feminism means and how it works. On the other side are Black and Brown women, working-class women, immigrants, minorities, indigenous women, trans women and shelter-dwellers, many of whom live feminist lives but rarely get to speak or write about them. In the rudimentary sense there is an assumption that the really strong women – the ‘real’ feminists, reared by other white feminists – do not end up in abusive situations.

In reality they do. But their disproportionate access to resources such as money, job security and established social networks means that they end up in shelters or in need of public resources such as Medicaid, food stamps and subsidized housing far less frequently than women of colour in the same position do. Conversely, women of colour – who are more often likely to be immigrant and poor – do have to take help from strangers and the state; they are the visibly needy and the obviously victimized. This imbalance is one of the factors that fosters and maintains women of colour as a passive source of cautionary tales. White women need help too, and they seek it as well, but the cultural attitudes that paint people of colour as freeloaders use any instances of women of colour seeking help as a means to confirm that prejudice.

There is also the powerful – sometimes voiced and sometimes implicit – assumption that non-white women suffering trauma is the ‘usual’ state of affairs, because their victimhood stems from their unfeminist cultures; while abused white women are portrayed as an aberration, a glitch, and not a reflection of wider trends or values in white culture. This is a prime example of the double standard by which whiteness, and the feminism that has sprung from it, asserts itself as inherently superior.

This phenomenon strongly discourages women like me from owning up to the hardships we have endured, thus further reinforcing the loop of assumption and seeming supporting evidence around what a feminist looks like: educated, successful, feminist women do not come from backgrounds of abuse, exploitation or trauma, and therefore women who have experienced these things are not credible feminists. The threat of being perceived as substantiating a discriminatory cultural norm – that of the

abused woman of colour (and in my case, the immigrant and abused woman of colour) – enforces its own silence.

I know that identifying myself as someone who has done time in the trenches, lived in fear for my life, moved from shelter to shelter, and who carries the scars of that trauma, will win me momentary praise from white women. And in that instant they will say the right things, marvel at my courage, ask questions about what hiding from an abuser was like, what being a single mother entails. But my ownership of this othered identity will also allow them to demote me as being below the women who do the real work of feminism, define its boundaries, its intellectual parameters and policies. ‘Real’ feminists, in their eyes, are fighting for the cause in the public arena, untrammelled by the shifting burden of messy experience.

What I feel in these moments is not imposter syndrome. At the wine bar in Manhattan, I know that I have experienced more and overcome more than the women with me tonight. But I also know that my companions’ world is split into women of colour who have stories to tell (or to be told on their behalf) about their own specific experiences, and white women who have the perspective and authority to wield power responsibly on behalf of everyone. There is a racial hierarchy here that is left unacknowledged and hence intact. Some women are there to show us all why we need feminism, and others are there to make it happen, try to get it to work. This dichotomous view of how feminism works (or indeed how any movement for social change should work) is the central mechanism which slots women of colour’s experiences under the mental label of ‘other’, allowing them to be automatically dismissed in the arena of white feminism.

Another factor at play in this ranking of feminists is the myth of ‘relatability’ – the language of personal preference used to legitimize the narrowness of white empathy, the rigidity of the white imagination. The academic departments, publishing houses, newsrooms, international NGO boards and civil rights agencies of the Western world are filled with white, middle-class women. In order to be welcomed into these spaces of power, I need to be ‘relatable’ to those who fill them, to ‘fit’ into the spaces of power. I must be recognizable in my humanity specifically to white and middle-class people; must accommodate their assumptions about what a good person looks and sounds like – however biased, unreasonable or self-involved those assumptions are – or pay the price with my own exclusion.

On a superficial level, I can demonstrate kinship with middle-class white women via mentions of fervent feminist awakenings in college, dating mishaps on various apps, curated details of an affluent urban life and a diligent skincare routine. I can also demonstrate it by not mentioning the kinds of experiences white people believe do not apply to them – certain kinds of domestic abuse, certain kinds of migration, certain kinds of internecine conflict.

The cult of relatability rationalizes the exclusion of certain kinds of lived experience from the hierarchies of feminist power, with pervasive consequences for feminist thought and praxis. Many institutions involved in feminist policy-making do not just refuse to consider the lived experience of women of colour as a useful perspective for colleagues to bring to the table; they actually treat it as a strike against applicants, claiming they will be ‘less objective’ because of it. During my six years of service on the Board of Directors for Amnesty International USA, I never once saw any of the many prisoners of conscience whose cases had been highlighted by the organization invited to participate in policy discussions, let alone nominated to sit on the board as experts on the problems Amnesty sought to eradicate. Even the abused women’s shelter where I worked in my early thirties had a rule that excluded residents of the shelter from volunteering or working there for several years after they had last used the service.

The great lie of relatability is its implied claim that there is one truly neutral perspective, one original starting point, against which all else should be measured. Relatability is just subjectivity dressed up as objectivity. The question we’re not supposed to ask when presented with the ‘problem’ of insufficient relatability is: ‘Relatable to whom?’ And so the stories of women of colour are often told, but the perspective gained from living such stories never becomes part of the epistemology of feminism.

The functional dichotomy between expertise and experience is in no way incidental. Many white feminists have forged successful careers in punditry and policy on the basis of formal expertise – accumulating qualifications, conducting research, getting published in journals and books. They have staked out a professional space in which ideas can be constructed and dismantled. And because access to educational and professional opportunities is unevenly distributed in favour of middle-class white people, this emphasis on expertise becomes a kind of gatekeeping of power

that locks out people of colour, as well as working-class people, migrants and many other groups. The introduction of a different kind of authority into this space, then – one founded in lived experience which these ‘experts’ may not share – is seen as a threat to the legitimacy of their own contribution to women’s rights, as if feminist thought and praxis is a zero-sum game, with one kind of knowledge supplanting the other.

The anxiety around the challenge to the primacy of expertise, which goes hand in hand with a challenge to whiteness and its hoarding of power, leads to a particular kind of racialized calculus. If an experience or characteristic is associated with a non-white group, then it is coded automatically as valueless, and in turn anyone associated with that experience becomes themselves devalued. This is the way that hegemony protects itself: silencing and punishing difference by stripping away its legitimacy. These kinds of motivated value judgements are at the heart of white supremacy. And this is how white supremacy operates within feminism, with middle-class white women at the top ensuring that the credentials that middle-class white women have remain the most valued criteria within feminism itself.

Sitting at the wine bar, I am aware of all of this. And I can feel my rising anger at having to ‘keep it light’ and accommodate the expectations of people unfamiliar with all the things that can and do go wrong for women like me. But a voice deep inside me insists, ‘You’ve come so far.’ I know precisely what that means: I want to have a voice in a way women like me – single mothers, immigrant brides, abuse survivors, women without safety nets or connections or fancy college degrees – rarely get to have. And I almost have it, I tell myself. I’m so nearly there. It’s just the difference between being proud of my truth and censoring it.

Tonight, I choose the latter. ‘Oh, I was married young and went to college in the US,’ I say breezily. ‘He was a jerk.’ I roll my eyes. ‘So I divorced him and never looked back.’

It is just the right amount of information. ‘Good for you!’ one of them gasps. ‘Wow, I haven’t even been married once and you’ve already been divorced,’ laughs another from the end of the table. The conversation moves seamlessly on. When the bill comes for the three pitchers of sangria, it is divided equally among us all. I pay a full share, even though I have nursed a single Diet Coke. Nobody cares to notice.

Literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first pointed out how Europeans assume that they know the ‘other’, placing it in the context of the oppressed, in her groundbreaking essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Her famous articulation of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’¹ is a theoretical framework that undergirds much of this book. Spivak identifies the ways in which colonial populations (the ‘subaltern’ of her essay’s title) were historically locked out of power by their imperial oppressors, unable in any sense to ‘speak’; I am interested in examining how women of colour today are given some chances to speak but are still not heard. Unlike Spivak’s work, this is not a book about feminist theory but rather feminist practice and its problematic genealogies: the injustices of the past which persist and re-emerge in new forms in the present.

In the gender-only narrative that has long dominated mainstream feminism, all women are pitted against all men, with whom they seek parity. In this struggle, white women have taken for themselves the right to speak for all women, occasionally allowing a woman of colour to speak but only when she can do so in the tone and language of white women, adopting the priorities, causes and arguments of whiteness. But the assumption that women together stand with the same disadvantages against men is flawed. All white women enjoy white racial privilege, whereas women of colour are affected not simply by gender inequality but also by racial inequality. A colour-blind feminism thus imposes a cost on women of colour, erasing a central part of their lived experience and their political reality. This makes it impossible more generally to see the ways in which a white-centric feminism is not serving their needs.

Growing up in Pakistan, I saw my mother, my grandmother and my aunts survive terrible suffering of all sorts. They experienced migrations, devastating business losses, inept husbands, lost relations, legal discrimination and so much more, without ever giving in to despair, without ever abandoning those who relied on them, without ever failing to show up. Their resilience, their sense of responsibility, their empathy and their capacity for hope are also feminist qualities, but not ones that the current feminist arithmetic will permit. In the value system of white feminism, it is rebellion, rather than resilience, that is seen as the ultimate feminist virtue;

my maternal forebears' endurance is labelled a pre-feminist impulse – misguided, unenlightened and unable to deliver change.

No attention can be garnered by Pakistani feminists unless they do something that is recognizable within the white feminist sphere of experience – skateboard while wearing their headscarves, march with placards, write a book about sex, run away to the West. The truth that resilience may be just as much a feminist quality as rebellion is lost in the story of feminism that is written and populated entirely by white women. This too is a legacy of white supremacy: feminism itself has never been disaggregated from the white gaze. It has become the only kind of feminism we recognize or even have language for. And that means that, most of the time, when women speak 'feminism' they unintentionally take on the cadence and concerns of whiteness.

The consequence of being unable to separate whiteness and feminism's agenda is that feminists everywhere continue to be tied to the history and trajectory of white feminists. Black schoolgirls are taught about the renowned suffragist Susan B. Anthony, unknowingly imbibing reverence for a woman who, annoyed by the progress of the 15th Amendment, which would give Black men the vote, told Frederick Douglass, 'I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman.' South Asian feminists who adore Jane Austen's heroines as models of strength, wit and judgement are also absorbing Austen's imperialist views – her justifications for white colonizers taking over land without native consent. In countless cases like this, the uncritical presentation of white feminism as the definitive and only kind of feminism covertly recruits women of colour with its own content.

There are two antidotes to this.

First, we must excise white supremacy from within feminism. The disproportionate space that has been taken up by whiteness in the movement, and the implicit suggestion that this imbalance exists because only white women are actually feminists, must be repopulated by robust accounts of other feminisms: those that were actively suppressed or erased by colonial domination and silenced by whiteness, and those that have been eclipsed by the obliviousness, past and present, of white privilege.

Second, since experience engenders politics, both must be reintroduced into the necessary vocabulary of feminism. The erasure of non-white

women's experiences has meant the erasure of their politics from mainstream feminist conversation, and both must be urgently revalued as integral to the feminist canon. To make their experience explicit, feminists of all kinds must work to develop their own genealogies, to look at the women in their lives and in their own histories who have not been considered 'feminist' because they do not mirror the projects and priorities of white women.

This work has already been started by the many non-white writers committed to telling the stories of women of colour. Voicing and documenting experience is valuable in and of itself: a vital affirmation of humanity and an expression of collective solidarity, each of them an important kind of self-care and community care for women of colour and other marginalized women. But it is also a catalyst to revitalize the political, so that feminism's strategies and goals reach beyond white and middle-class interests and draw in those of all the women whose stories and politics are presently invisible, and whose needs, having been systematically underserved and elided for centuries, are most urgent.

This book is a call to action; a demand for collective rather than only individual or personal improvement; a look to the larger community rather than just oneself. The story of feminism which our daughters learn tomorrow must be different from the one we know today. It is not enough for alternative narratives of women of colour simply to exist; they must actually influence the content and the course of the movement for gender parity. And before this can happen, white women must reckon with just how much white privilege has influenced feminist movements and continues to influence the agenda of feminism today. These are not novel suggestions, but they are ones that have long been ignored with alarming obstinacy.

I am tired of the pretence of engagement even as white feminists in power cling on to their fear, their filters, the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which they include and exclude. I want to be able to meet at a wine bar and have an honest conversation about change, about transformation, about how we can bring a failed system down and build a new and better one.



1

In the Beginning, There were White Women In 2007, the much-celebrated feminist playwright Eve Ensler wrote an essay for *Glamour* magazine. ‘I have just returned from hell’, it began, going on to detail her visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where she had met ‘girls as young as nine [who had been] raped by gangs of soldiers’. According to its title, the article is about ‘Women Left for Dead – and the Man Who’s Saving Them’, but this is not immediately clear. Even while detailing the anguish of Congolese women, Ensler manages to keep the attention on herself. ‘How do I convey these stories ...?’ she asks. ‘How do I tell you ...?’ Then, ‘I stay for a week at Panzi. Women line up to tell me their stories.’

Having just recounted a horrific story about ‘Alfonsine’, rather than inviting the reader to reflect on it, she writes: ‘I look at Alfonsine’s petite body and imagine the scars beneath her humble white clothes. I imagine the reconstructed flesh, the agony she experienced after being shot. I listen carefully. I cannot detect a drop of bitterness or any desire for revenge.’

Writing about the surgery that is needed to repair the fistulas suffered by so many women victims, she again rejects a simple third-person account that would focus on the patient and instead says: 'I sit in on a typical operation in a clean, safe, but seriously underequipped operating room (nurses use torn pieces of a green dressing gown to tie the women's ankles to the stirrups). I am able to see the fistula.'

Her repeated emphasis on what she herself is doing and hearing, rather than on what she sees and hears, strongly suggests that her goal is to show the crucial role that she, a white woman, is playing in the lives of these women. She is eager to enlist *Glamour's* readership as well: they can write to the Congolese president, or they can donate to the hospital where the rape victims are being treated or the rehabilitation centre where 'they'll learn to become political leaders', through Ensler's own website.

Ensler's article demonstrates how the white saviour complex intersects with feminism in the twenty-first century. A white woman takes on the task of speaking for raped and brutalized 'other' women, positioning herself as their rescuer and the conduit through which emancipation must flow. It is also an example of how the plight of 'over there' exists as a foil against which the successes of women in the West can be judged. 'How lucky we are,' readers of Ensler's article are encouraged to conclude, mournfully shaking their heads at the circumstances of women who live in less civilized parts of the world. In such cases, it is notable that the naming or erasure of non-white women's identities is entirely at the whim of the white woman telling the story. In cases where names should be mentioned, say those of the nurses and other medical staff (but which would perhaps draw attention away from the white woman's central role as saviour), they are left out; in others where confidentiality would be helpful, such as not photographing victims like 'Nadine', we are told that she agreed to be photographed if her name was changed.

The 2020 Annual Letter issued by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provides another example of this calculated and deliberate phenomenon, particularly as it relates to the optics of white women benevolently helping Black and Brown people. ¹ The first image used in the report sets the tone: it features Melinda Gates bending down to meet the eyes of an unnamed Black woman who is wearing a mask and lying in a hospital bed. The

subject's anonymity is typical of this kind of iconography. We may assume that the name has been omitted to protect the woman's privacy, but the pattern continues throughout the text. Even when the people of colour depicted are appearing in a professional capacity, providing rather than receiving care, where there would be no need for anonymity, their names are left out. Bill and Melinda themselves, the focal white people in the photos, are the only people ever named in these group photos. A visit to the Gugulethu Community Health Clinic features unnamed Black and Brown 'staff'. The section on gender opens with an image of Melinda flanked by two unidentified, diminutive Indian women.

So effective is this mode of virtue signalling that it has even become a trend on dating apps. A website called Humanitarians of Tinder is devoted to pictures of valiant and loving and oh-so-adventurous white women (and some men) dishing out hugs, cuddling babies and partaking in customary 'native' dances.² The same template used by Ensler and Gates to harvest public approval or drum up financial backing is here reapplied to the task of attracting sexual and romantic partners. As ever, the Black and Brown faces are mere props in a white enterprise.

This habit of centring the white woman when talking about the emancipation of women of colour is not just a recent cultural trend limited to dating apps, fashion magazines and billionaire philanthropists, however. The white feminist saviour complex first took shape in the late colonial era.

In the home countries of white women, nineteenth-century gender roles and enduring male privilege constrained their freedoms significantly. But setting off for the colonies allowed these women a unique kind of escape. In India or Nigeria they had a significant advantage: white privilege. Still subordinate to white men, by virtue of race they were nevertheless considered superior to the colonized 'subjects'. This superiority automatically granted them greater power and also greater freedom.

'I am a Person in this country – they all think I was a Person!' wrote an effusive Gertrude Bell to her parents in March 1902.³ She was writing from Jerusalem, where she had gone to learn Arabic and to get away from the unkind tittering of London society. Bell's outburst was revealing. In her thirties and with a penchant for falling for the wrong men (they were either poor or married or dead, or all three) and not falling for the right ones (she

friend-zoned more than one wealthy prospect), she was far too old to be single. In a society that expected matrimony and motherhood of its women, her relationship status rendered her functionally redundant.

Home reminded Gertrude of her failings, and the damning deficiency of having tried and failed to land a husband. In the exotic East, there was plenty of room for London ladies who had aged out of the marriage market, and as Gertrude soon learned, the privileges of empire more than made up for the disadvantages of gender. Indeed, she was a 'Person' in Jerusalem because, unlike at home, her whiteness placed her above most of the rest of humanity. No Brown man could control or question her as she traipsed the bazaars in her straw hat and white dresses, nor could he chastise her for riding a horse like a man.

In this way, many wealthy British white women's very first experiences of freedom were caught up with the flexing of imperial superiority. Contrary to the customary slow slog of history, Britain's empire had swelled rapidly through the nineteenth century, and British women had become citizens of empire. At a time when white women were still the legal property of their husbands, the opportunity to taste a little of the power which was usually withheld from them was evidently too tantalizing to resist, even though it meant subjugating others. As one put it, 'it was an escape from the old stereotyped existence whose comfortable, commonplace round we had run, till it had become altogether monotonous and humdrum'. ⁴

Ironically, or perhaps simply staying true to the political pedigree of the family that supported her financially, Gertrude Bell herself was opposed to women's suffrage; in 1908 she would serve as the honorary secretary of the Anti-Suffrage League. ⁵ It makes sense that the rugged Gertrude was in it for herself, her individualism at odds with any collective effort. The idea that *all* women were equal to men and could do what she could do made no sense to her at all. Her faith was in her own exceptional nature.

Gertrude Bell's opposition to women getting the vote did not much matter, for there were many other white women pursuing the suffragist cause, and they too would benefit from their racial superiority as they tended to their lesser sisters across the empire. If Bell found in the breadth of Britain's domain a freedom of movement and a lifting of gendered

constraints, these suffrage campaigners saw in the very existence of colonized native women the availability of a politically expedient moral contrast. The subjugation of women, they argued, could only be the practice of uncivilized cultures like the ones that had been colonized by the British.

In her 1851 essay 'The Enfranchisement of Women', Harriet Taylor conjured up a picture of the unemancipated woman for her readers: the 'Oriental or Asiatic' woman who was kept in seclusion and was hence 'servile-minded'. ⁶ Later suffragists went much further, with one pamphlet from 1879 arguing that 'if the physical health of a woman is admittedly impaired owing to confinement in a limited space, her mental health also suffers through legislative disabilities ... it is unfair to deprive her of political liberty and as in the Oriental mode shut her up in four walls'. ⁷ Others used phrases like 'abject subjection' and 'our cruelly crippled sisters in the East' ⁸ to describe the hapless women they imagined as desperately needing their attention and assistance.

A whole cultural discourse highlighted the position of colonized women of colour within the colonial universe. In the eyes of Victorian society, 'Eastern women were doubly inferior, being women and Easterners'. ⁹ Even so, white women who travelled to South Asia and the Middle East were very interested in meeting them, organizing 'zenana visits' to the female-only quarters (*zenana*) of wealthy households and palaces as a popular tourist activity.

Bell herself managed several zenana visits with the famed Eastern women, encounters she records with almost snide condescension in her book *Persian Pictures*. During her first encounter, at the sultan's palace itself, she finds the conversation lacking despite the efforts of the French interpreter, noting that all their hostess seems able to manage as a response is 'a nervous giggle, turning aside her head and burying it in her pocket-handkerchief'. ¹⁰ The lasting image of the Persian woman as a tittering idiot does not fade, despite the appearance of two daughters who speak of their studies in French and Arabic. By the end of it all, Gertrude has determined everything, even the lemon ices served as a refreshing snack, to be unsatisfactory. Ever glad to be white and English, Gertrude and her friend take leave of the three ladies, who stand gazing after them from behind the canvas walls. After another similar visit, Gertrude writes: 'Their

prisoned existence seemed to us a poor mockery of life as we cantered homewards up the damp valley.’ The sun, she notes contentedly, has dropped below the horizon in Persia, ‘bearing the fulness of his light to the Western world – to our own world’.

While colonization began as early as the sixteenth century, the zenana visit was very much in fashion throughout the eighteenth century – when colonists and occasionally their wives set out for the mysterious ‘Orient’ in greater numbers. The novelty wore out a bit as the empire ground on and they became a more common stop on the Western tourist route, but the legacy of those intrusions lived on in the form of nineteenth-century feminist rhetoric situating these other women as inferiors.

Most of the women who wrote pamphlets preaching white women’s enfranchisement, and certainly most of those who consumed them, had never been to the East. It is even more doubtful that they had met any of the women from the harems and seraglios against whom they wished to contrast their own condition. The power of the comparison came not from the truth of Eastern women’s actual conditions, but from the imaginative currency of whiteness versus non-whiteness. Believing themselves to be superior, white women argued that they deserved higher status and more freedoms than colonized women. That potent ‘us’ and ‘them’ became an indispensable lever for white women pushing for their own emancipation.

The *Glamour* magazine of the late nineteenth century, *The Englishwoman’s Review*, was launched in 1866 to create a platform for this very argument: that white British women, now the leading ladies of empire, should have lives that were visible, free and politically meaningful, in contrast to the sequestered, conquered, invisible women of the East. It was impossible, after all, that the lives of British women be defined by constraints and constrictions similar to those faced by the lesser women of the world, who had yet to be civilized. ¹¹ The question of exactly *how* uncivilized Eastern women really were raged on for years in the pages of the magazine. This argument cut both ways. On one hand, it appealed to the pity and generosity of the white saviour: see how badly Brown men treat Brown women; white men would never be so barbaric. On the other, it made an appeal to white dominance and greed: whatever Brown women have, white women must have more and better.

The writers of *The Englishwoman's Review* saw their screeds and essays as the material of the continued ascendancy of feminism in Britain, and themselves as 'workers in a women's cause who were making history'. ¹² Some, like the author Bayle Bernard, thought that the wretched Indian women living a 'sunless, airless' existence were nevertheless educable and hence redeemable, which is why all Englishwomen inside and outside India should 'throw their hearts and souls into the work [of educating them], and determine never to rest until they have raised their Eastern sisters to their own level; and then may the women of India at last attain a position honorable to themselves'. ¹³ Other articles critiqued the use of words like 'primitive' or 'uncivilized' about people of colour and colonial subjects, though of course even these did not include the actual participation of the women in question. Such women were divested of politics of their own, useful only when 'explained, modified, and put to feminist use'. ¹⁴

Whatever the sincerity of the *Review's* debates about lifting up Brown sisters, in practice they functioned as a glue that united a vast variety of British women under the imperial umbrella – all of them believing in and projecting the vision of imperialism as a benevolent force. As Ensler's bravery in travelling to Congo renders her the altruistic heroine of her report, so the nineteenth-century Englishwomen who decamped to the colonies proved to all those who stayed at home that empire was not simply the project of the British man but that it belonged to women as well. In this 'feminized' imperialism, the duty of the imperial woman was to stand with the men who served the empire in shouldering 'the white man's burden'. An ad in *The Englishwoman's Review* from January 1888 said it all: 'An Opening for Women in the Colonies' beseeched readers to offer their services to colonial peoples, because their plight, particularly that of Indian women, should be a 'special and deserving object of feminist concern'. ¹⁵

And yet, unsurprisingly, the white women who arrived in the colonies to build girls' schools or to train teachers were ill-prepared to cope with the basic cultural differences they encountered in their charitable subjects. If European feminists are terribly annoyed at Muslim women who insist on covering up their bodies today, they were equally annoyed by the lack of coverings worn by Hindu women then.

Annette Akroyd was a British woman who set off for Bengal to build a school. Once there, she remarked that she found the sari, as a garment, both ‘vulgar and Inappropriate’ as it left women, in her view, semi-nude. ‘There must be a decided change ... in the lower garments,’ she complained in a letter home after her arrival. ‘They cannot go into public places in such costumes.’ Even when she encountered a well-to-do Bengali woman, she likened the way that the woman dressed and sat to a ‘savage who had never heard of dignity or modesty’. [16](#)

The white women, ostensibly there to help their colonial sisters reach their emancipated potential, were quick to use signifiers like clothing and posture as evidence that Brown women were limited by an innate primitivism. Meanwhile, by the mid-nineteenth century, almost fifty years before Gertrude Bell arrived in the colonies, Indian women had already formed reform-minded, ladies-only organizations. By the 1870s, Indian women were already publishing their own magazines that dealt with women’s issues with such gusto that a ‘Women’s Press’ emerged in the North Indian province of Maharashtra. [17](#)

In that same decade, Indian women such as Pandita Ramabai, Soonderbai Powar and Krupabai Satthianadhan were translating literary texts from English and other European languages into local languages, and were active in speaking against their own subordinate role within society. [18](#) By 1882, not long after Ackroyd’s ill-fated trip (she soon gave up on the school and got married instead), there were 2,700 educational institutions for girls in India, with a total of 127,000 students, and fifteen training schools for teachers. [19](#) In 1896, Swarnakumari Devi began The Ladies Organization, [20](#) and she was preceded in 1889 by Pandita Ramabai, whose Sharada Sadan was dedicated to the education and employment of women. Around the same time, the Hindu Ladies Social and Literary Club held its first meetings under the auspices of Ramabai Ranade. From the 1890s onwards, Indian women were graduating from Indian colleges and universities and agitating for increased educational opportunities.

And in 1905, just around the time that Gertrude Bell was discovering her personhood and her superiority to the silly, cloistered women of the East, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the wife of a Bengali civil servant, penned one of the leading feminist texts of Indian literature in English,

Sultana's Dream – in which the protagonist is transported to a wondrous world devoid of men, where women run the show. The story was fiction but it reflected the strategy of separatism that Indian women had adopted in their organizations, which did not allow men to hold any of the high offices. This radical approach to female empowerment did not gain widespread uptake in Western feminist thought until the emergence of feminist separatism and the womyn's land movement in the second half of the twentieth century. [21](#)

On the odd occasion when a white feminist did come into contact with actual Brown women, the results were almost tragicomic. In one such encounter, the Egyptian feminist writer Huda Shaarawi was approached by a Luxembourgian woman, Marguerite Thomas-Clement. Thomas-Clement and her friends wanted to deliver a lecture to aristocratic Egyptian women in Cairo about the Western and Eastern attitudes to the veil. To ensure that these aristocratic women actually attended the event, she asked Shaarawi to find someone older and important to sponsor it.

Through the Egyptian feminist's efforts, Princess Ayn Al-Hayat Ahmed was persuaded to fill that role. On the day of the event, however, the princess was running late and the white women in charge of the event decided to begin without the presence of the honoured guest, prioritizing the European notion of punctuality over the Egyptian value of hospitality – or rather assuming that the white version of etiquette was the only 'real' one. The princess's eventual arrival with her entourage caused a commotion that interrupted Thomas-Clement's lecture and peeved the Western women, who felt the words of a white speaker should not have to compete with the arrival of Brown royalty. Eager consumers of the reviews and periodicals that situated colonized women as their inferiors, these white 'feminists' began to criticize both Shaarawi and Egyptian women at large, for not knowing proper etiquette. Shaarawi, in turn, was upset by this cultural condescension towards the Egyptian women who were present, and also towards her personally. [22](#)

The knee-jerk defensiveness of the European women upon being interrupted by Huda Shaarawi is a telling display of white fragility: the white women had not thought to pause proceedings until the royal guest had taken her seat, and yet they became immediately defensive and outraged at

the suggestion that they were being disrespectful. It demonstrates the discomfort felt when people of colour, seen as inherently inferior or in need of help (regardless of their material condition and experience), fail to show adequate gratitude to their white saviours, expose the shortcomings of those white people implicitly or explicitly, or point out the reality of their racial privilege. This internal discomfort is weaponized externally in any number of ways: anger, victimhood, a refusal to cooperate or communicate.

White fragility is in turn driven by the assumption that whiteness should remain central in every context. The lecture organizers' indignation about lateness may appear very reasonable, but punctuality, like all qualities, does not have absolute and universal value. Its importance is culturally coded.

In non-Western cultures, important guests are often late, and the other attendees duly wait for them as a mark of respect. This is an alternate etiquette to the Western one, and neither is inherently more correct than the other. But for the white women at the lecture, punctuality – prized by white Western culture, and at the nub of Protestant and capitalist values of productivity – was not simply a rule for white Western people, it had to be imposed on everyone else too.

In cases that involve bringing together disparate groups, there is always the question of whose norms should be respected, whose baseline adopted by all. This question and its resolution is what is meant by 'centring whiteness'. And such seemingly trivial impulses signal the direction of far-reaching ones, revealing the intentions of one group to make the rules for the other.

These questions recur today, but little thought is given to the fact that it is the Western norms that always prevail in gatherings where an intersection of cultures or feminisms are involved. Instances like this tend to be rationalized away as one-off occurrences rather than understood as a pattern that has repeated itself for centuries – a pattern that is always to the benefit of white women and is driven by the fear that cross-race interactions will be abandoned altogether if white supremacy is not tolerated.

Race and feminism are nowhere more integrally connected than in the fight for women's suffrage. Scratching the surface of this relationship, it quickly becomes clear that the claims of the white suffragists were in part taken seriously *because* they existed within and alongside the more troubling

prospect of having to grant citizenship to Black and Brown men who had been colonized or enslaved.

Most British suffragettes made no bones about tying their right to the vote to their racial identity as Anglo-Saxons. The archival materials of the age are full of evidence of this noxious truth: the suffragist Charlotte Carmichael Stopes began her narrative of British women's 'historical privilege' by citing the 'racial character of our ancestors'. Helen Blackburn, who published her own history of the women's suffrage movement, glibly agreed, attributing the early equality of the sexes in Britain to Anglo-Saxon superiority over 'all the Indo-Germanic races'. Millicent Fawcett – who, like all other British suffragettes, thought that representative government had begun in England – asked the rhetorical question 'Why should she [England] not continue to lead as she has led before?' [23](#)

As the early twentieth century began and British suffragettes drew closer to winning the vote, they wanted their lesser colonized sisters to engage in a parallel struggle. But the politics of women in the colonies at the time, particularly in India, were geared towards winning freedom from colonial rule. Indian feminists like the poet Sarojini Naidu, among scores of others, adopted Mahatma Gandhi's famous slogan: 'India cannot be free until women are free and women cannot be free until India is free.' Naidu was a leader in the Quit India Movement, which demanded the British leave their homeland. She and hundreds of other female members participated in civil disobedience in the name of this cause, and were arrested and jailed by the British for it. [24](#)

Meanwhile, British suffragettes refused to support the fight against colonial domination abroad. Even though at home they were fighting the dominance of men who claimed that women could not govern themselves, they parroted these men when it came to arguing that Indians were incapable of governing themselves. They wanted the Indian women's suffragist movement to look and behave exactly like a miniature version of their own struggle, and saw support of the Indian independence movement as a traitorous abandonment of the women's cause.

While refusing to support Indian women in their political goal of self-rule, British suffragettes insisted that they were allies in the project of getting women the vote in a country where no one, male or female, was

free. The words of one Indian woman protesting a conference convened by British women could well have been spoken today: 'I disputed the right of British women to arrange a conference on Indian social evils in London, when all the speakers were British and many of them had never even visited India,' said Dhanvanthi Rama Rau. 'We [Indian feminists] were already assuming the responsibility ourselves, and we were sure we could be more successful than any outsiders, especially those who were ignorant of the cultural patterns of our social groups and therefore could not be as effective as our own social reformers.'

[25](#)

Seeing that the Indian feminists were not playing ball, the white suffragists decided to go about fighting for Indian women's right to vote themselves. In 1917, the Women's Indian Association was founded in Southern India, geared towards the specific project of getting the franchise for Indian women. The founders of the organization were mostly white women, including the famous theosophist Annie Besant. Eventually, some Indian women did join, however the bulk of Indian women's organizations were committed to resisting the British occupation.

From the beginning of the organization's existence, its leadership began to lobby various British parliamentary members. This included a radical Jewish MP, Edwin Montagu, whom they hoped would support their proposal for franchise for Indian women. In 1918, the proposal to extend the franchise to Indian women was presented before the Delhi Congress. The proposal passed with support from Millicent Fawcett who, years later, would be given a damehood.

Ultimately, however, white women could not win the franchise for Brown women from white men. In 1918, Viceroy of India Lord Chelmsford, along with Edwin Montagu, convened the Southborough Franchise Committee to interview Indian women regarding the feasibility of women's franchise. In 1919, the committee, which had only interviewed women from two of the country's eight provinces, declared that it had not found support for the vote among Indian women.

The reason was obvious: Indian women wanted the vote, but in a country free from colonial subjection to the British. What indeed was the power of a vote in a country enslaved? Indian women knew that once the struggle for independence was won, their own right to vote would come with it.

The Congress Party later tapped into this vision for twin emancipation from colonial and patriarchal constraints, promising in 1931 (a good bit after British women won suffrage) to grant all women the vote once it came to power. ²⁶ And when the British finally left India in 1947, it made good on this commitment: both the countries created in the wake (India and Pakistan) granted the vote to women in their constitutions.



2

Is Solidarity a Lie?

In the winter of 2012, I received an email from a man who at the time taught Middle Eastern politics at the satellite campus of a large Midwestern university. We knew each other because of our circulation on the adjunct circuit of the colleges and schools in the area, and my own students had told me that he was an attentive and thoughtful professor. In the email, he said that some close female friends of his were arranging an informal event that would bring together feminists from different parts of the world for a conversation about women's rights. The idea was to have the event open to the public at large, to generate local interest in international issues.

Sceptical of these sorts of well-intentioned but vaguely described events and conversations (and not knowing him particularly well), I ignored the email. I was, in those days, spending my days representing women at a domestic violence shelter and this took up a good deal of my time. The crisis-based legal assistance I was providing my clients, most of whom were Black or Brown immigrant women, kept me busy with the urgent and pressing issues of immigration and child custody that their cases inevitably involved.

Two days before the event, however, I received a call from a friend of mine. During the call, he urged me to attend the event, not least because it

would be an opportunity to introduce the work I was doing at the shelter to the community. Reluctantly, I said I would do it.

On the day of the event, I had spent my lunch hour jotting down some notes about feminism in Pakistan, the subject I understood I would be speaking on that evening. It was a cold and wet one, and I trudged towards the venue balancing bag and umbrella. As I approached, I could see the building was lit up, and the hum of voices wafted out into the night. It appeared to be a well-attended event, which made me feel hopeful and excited.

When I stepped inside, a tall willowy blonde with her hair in braids asked if she could help me. I introduced myself as ‘one of the speakers’, information that immediately led her to consult a printout – held together, I noticed, with a gold paper clip. ‘Oh, you’re Rafia Zakaria,’ she said, crossing off my name. ‘You’re late!’ she exclaimed as she appraised me again, now with a frown. ‘And you’re not dressed in ...’ The half-sentence hung in the air as she searched and failed to find the correct word. ‘In your native clothes!’ she finally said. I stood there, shocked by the ease with which she had chastised me.

Before I could come up with a response, my blonde handler was back in action, leading me through the maze of tables that were interspersed throughout the room. Everywhere I looked, there were white women, all of them flushed from the little cups of ‘free’ wine that their entrance fee (of which I had only just learned) had got them.

‘Here’s your table!’ my handler declared. On a white table were a variety of trinkets that I recognized as tchotchkes sold at various tourist stores in and around the airport in Karachi. Someone had also printed out photographs of various Pakistani landmarks – the Himalayas, the King Faisal mosque, and others of the kind you would find in tourist guidebooks – and cute children, and placed them in the middle of the earrings, bangles, keychains and cell phone cases. Handwritten on a square piece of paper was the phrase ‘Made in Pakistan’.

While I was woodenly taking all of this in, my handler decided I was the sort of stupid that requires specific instruction. She turned to me and said, ‘So the idea is that the ladies are milling about, and you’re to try and engage with them and then tell them about your country and show them these handicrafts which are all for sale.’ I looked around the room and,

indeed, next to each table were women of colour dressed in their 'native garb'. Next to me was 'Nepal', and a little way off was 'Kenya'. Some of the women were just standing, while others were being assailed by questions from white women who had decided that this was what counted as participation.

'What languages do they speak in Kenya?' one yelled out. 'When did you get here from your native country?' another probed. It was, all of it, a circus: the white women were the roused and rowdy audience, and the non-white women the performers.

I stood next to my table but not against it as I had been instructed. I could see myself from the vantage point of the white attendee: here was a needy Brown woman, and helping her was as easy as buying a trinket. If one was feeling particularly generous and humane, one could even chat with her to prove one's commitment to diversity. I felt sick.

This was a 'global bazaar', where the 'natives' from various countries could raise money for some noteworthy cause – orphanages, malnutrition, girls' schooling, even microloans. Like extensions of the merchandise, the women who had been invited to 'speak' were to stand obediently by the tchotchkes that commodified their culture.

In the shame-laden minutes that followed, nobody ventured near my table or asked me any questions. This was good. I felt suspended, paralysed by the anticipatory terror that exists when someone raises their hand to strike you; before the actual sting and burn of the slap itself. I was angry, I was ashamed, I was aghast.

One of my handler's colleagues walked by my table. 'Is there a problem?' she asked.

'Yes, there is a problem,' I replied, curtly. 'This is not what I was invited to do. I was told that I was to give a small talk about Pakistan.'

She stared at me, the look of an elementary school teacher dealing with a problem child. 'Well, it actually is; you're supposed to engage people and give a little talk,' she cooed. 'We wanted it to be a bit informal, you know.'

I felt stupid to have said anything at all. Where to begin and how to explain? She walked off, and I gathered my purse and my folder of notes and walked out into the night to my car. I sat there in the dark for a good half-hour and cried.

I can still feel the burning shame I felt that day. The event was degrading, because its very arrangement situated women of colour as the beseeching, hungry ‘others’ trying to grab the attention of white women. Instead of a conversation, it was an enactment of power disparity. The women of colour, their stories, their histories, had to be abridged to fit the tiny attention span of white women walking by. Fetishized and in native dress, they could jockey to be the most colourful, the most alluring, along with the trinkets they were selling. It was, in sum, a spectacle, one in which all stereotypes about non-white women and the cultures they represent were reaffirmed, and conversation was only occasioned by the possibility of a transaction.

The idea that people of colour, their cultures and countries are just flavours in a wide buffet laid out for white consumers’ consumption is rooted in and pervaded by white feminism’s earliest exchanges with women of colour, discussions that first surfaced (as so many white feminist habits did) through the fight for suffrage.

Unlike their British sisters, the nineteenth-century American suffragists did not have an entire empire (yet) in which to perform and celebrate their feminist awakenings or export their suffrage movement. They were, however, quite eager to show off their own ‘new women’, modern and forward-looking, as a beacon for all womanhood everywhere. They got the chance to do just that at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, an event marking the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s ‘discovery’ of America, and intended to celebrate the achievements and talents of the whole nation rather than only Chicago. In the end, it showcased not just how white American women saw themselves, but also how they saw the rest of the world by contrast.

The geography of the fair itself offers a picture of the white American world view at the time. On one side of the park was the gleaming ‘White City’ of the future, with grand neo-classical buildings dedicated to celebrated industries and fields of production or study: horticulture, crafts, art, agriculture and so on. The main attraction meant to draw in crowds to the White City was electricity, and all the wonders that it could produce. There was an electric tram to carry people around from one part of the large exposition grounds to another. The first ‘movie’ ever made was on display – a seconds-long instance of a man sneezing – which astounded the public. There was even a small moving sidewalk.

The White City was literally white – both in its buildings and in its representation. Black people were permitted to *visit*, but of the thousands of exhibits, none were devoted to the achievements of Black Americans in the almost thirty years since slavery had been abolished. The only Black employees of the exposition, other than those hired to play African ‘savages’, were porters, messengers, a couple of nurses and clerks, and a single army chaplain. This exclusionary dynamic was both controversial and deliberate.

In 1893, racial tensions were high over the 15th Amendment and the integration of Black people into society as free and full individuals. During the initial planning of the fair, President Benjamin Harrison had appointed a commission of a hundred representatives from all over the country, all ‘simon-pure and lily-white’. ¹ If any Black visitors to the fair wanted to meet with or interact with their own leaders and famous figures, they had to make their way to the Haiti Pavilion. There, Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells gave speeches, interacted with fair-goers, and distributed copies of their newspaper *The Conservator* as well as a pamphlet lambasting the systematic exclusion of Black Americans from the fair. Both Douglass and Wells were American citizens, not Haitian, but in the eyes of white Americans they fit nowhere at all.

White women, on the other hand, were celebrated in style. Towards the top edge of the White City complex stood the Woman’s Building, filled with many hundreds of exhibits by white women from all over the United States: from crafts to paintings to household devices. The all-white Board of Lady Managers assigned to oversee this building squabbled over which sort of white women – rich society women or activist suffragists – would run the show. Philanthropist Bertha Palmer, the wife of a very important and very rich white man, faced off against Phoebe Couzins, a longtime suffragist from poor roots, for leadership of the board.

Palmer wanted the fair to ‘shed light on [women’s] economic situation around the world’ and believed that while women ‘should be able to do anything they want, they should not want to do *everything*’. ² Couzins felt that the Woman’s Building should be more overtly political, highlighting the suffragist struggle. Neither was interested in including Black women in

the conversation, or in having Black American women's achievements reflected in the exhibits.

Black activists, Ida B. Wells among them, petitioned for representation in the Woman's Building in the form of one token member, 'whose duty it would be to collect exhibits from the colored women of America', but this request was of course denied.³ While British suffragettes discussed what was best for Indian and Egyptian women without consulting them, white American women conspired in the erasure of the Black women of their own nation.

On the top floor of the Woman's Building was a tea room where white women, tired after traipsing through the exhibition, could get a bite to eat and enjoy the cool breeze with an unobstructed view of the Midway Plaisance.

And maybe more in line with a spare limb, the Midway was a narrow, crowded strip intended for entertainment and education. Amid its fairground rides and snack sellers were model villages representing different countries of the world, with people from those countries shipped in to populate them. At the beginning of each day, all the performers participated in a parade. Dressed in 'native' costumes, they marched up and down the mile-long Midway to entice visitors to their various villages. In the case of the Dahomey Village, Black Americans were hired to act the part of so-called African savages, allowed only to beat drums and make unintelligible sounds. Frederick Douglass and other Black activists emphatically criticized the Dahomean exhibit, writing that it was only there 'to exhibit the Negro as repulsive savage'.⁴

The Midway Plaisance also included the 'Tower of Beauties', which exhibited 'live' women from all around the world doing a provocative 'Hoochie Coochie dance'. In some souvenir books, fair-goers were invited to rank the women of the Plaisance from least to most beautiful. If the Woman's Building was about the personal achievements of respectable white women, outside its confines the 'other' woman was exoticized, objectified and generalized to a crude type.

Here was the world as white Americans saw it at the turn of the twentieth century: white men at its blazing, electrically lit centre; white women protectively ensconced in their own building, celebrating their own limited

achievements; and everyone else relegated to the periphery of this manufactured modern world, a flat caricature mostly included for entertainment value. The presence of racism at this time is not surprising, though it was unjust and was the subject of protest even then. The shocking part is how closely it parallels events today. The global bazaar event I found myself storming out of on a rainy midweek evening was all too reminiscent of that world's fair a century before. The women of colour, including myself, were not terribly unlike the foreign women doing the Hoochie Coochie, or situated along the Midway Plaisance. For us 'foreign women' tasked with standing next to tables of tourist wares – as for the Black women and foreign women at the fair – the white feminist Woman's Building remains impenetrable, a realm of power and discourse where we are not welcome and our absence has never been missed.

The Chicago fair's geography and centrality of white women as the only women whose achievements were worthy of being noted and commended was a precursor to the white-centric feminism that exists today. On 26 August 1920, the 19th Amendment was finally passed, granting suffrage to all American women. Its text declares: 'The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.' The celebrations that took place then, and for many years to come, failed to note that this was a hollow victory for Black women. ⁵ While the amendment nominally opened the ballot to women, a maze of restrictions specifically aimed at suppressing the Black vote were still on the books in many states.

The year the 19th Amendment passed, Black schoolteacher and civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune travelled through the state of Florida to encourage women to vote, facing tremendous obstacles every step of the way. The night before the election, white-robed Klansmen marched into Bethune's school in Daytona, intimidating the women who had gathered there ready to vote (but failing to deter them). A newspaper in Wilmington, Delaware, reported that the numbers of Black women who wanted to register to vote were 'unusually large' but that they were turned away for their alleged failure to 'comply with the constitutional tests', without any specification of what these tests were. The Black newspaper *Voice of the People* noted that 'only half a dozen Black women' had been registered to

vote in Birmingham, Alabama (where thousands would qualify), because of the state's restrictive rules for Black voters. ⁶ Though they had been active campaigners for suffrage from the beginning of the movement, Black women in America did not meaningfully win the right to vote until after the Civil Rights Movement, led by Martin Luther King Jr, led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

The inroads made by that law were undercut in 2013 when the Supreme Court of the United States struck down the Act, opening up new avenues for voter suppression such as the purge of voter rolls, closing polling places and new voter ID laws, all of which were issues in the 2020 presidential election. It is worth remembering that when the victory of the American suffragists is lauded every August, it is only white feminists whose emancipation is being celebrated.

Yet even white American feminists who passionately championed civil rights for Black Americans were not generally clear-sighted about supporting the political aspirations of their 'sisters' around the world (or, for that matter, in understanding the intersectional struggles of Black women at home, but more on that later). In this, they followed Simone de Beauvoir, philosopher and author of the groundbreaking feminist text *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. It is fashionable now to celebrate de Beauvoir as a philosopher in her own right who was responsible for key insights of existential philosophy for which her longtime partner Jean-Paul Sartre took credit, including but not limited to the idea of the 'other'. Yet her work is also foundational in establishing the white woman as *the* woman – the universal subject of feminism.

De Beauvoir's goal in *The Second Sex* is to carve out for women the position of the universalize-able and generalizable subject (until then, philosophy was directed to and centred on 'man' and not 'woman'), so that women (like men) could begin to exist in the realm of philosophy. Until then, only men had been treated as this kind of subject by European philosophers.

This in itself is a worthy goal, but in comparing 'women' to racial 'others', with no acknowledgement of the crossover between these two groups, de Beauvoir reveals herself to be thinking of women as only white women. From the introductory pages of *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir

identifies woman as the fundamental ‘other’, comparing this phenomenon to how ‘for the native of a country, inhabitants of other countries are viewed as “foreigners”; Jews are the “others” for anti-Semites, blacks for racist Americans, indigenous peoples for colonists, proletarians for the propertied classes’. ⁷ De Beauvoir identifies the justifications for inferior conditions of race, class and caste as not just comparable but the same. Stereotypes about the ‘Jewish character’ and the ‘Black soul’ are in her view equivalent to stereotypes about the ‘eternal feminine’. In this way, she sees each of these as discrete systems of oppression which can be compared, but do not overlap.

In one section, de Beauvoir compares anti-Black racism to antifeminism, saying that anti-feminists offer ‘separate but equal’ status to women, in the same way that Jim Crow laws subject Black people to extreme forms of discrimination. There are, she says, ‘deep analogies’ between women and Black people; both must be liberated from the same paternalism and master class that wants to keep them in their place. And yet in making this very point, the Black people she describes are assumed to be American and male, and the women are assumed to be white. She uses Richard Wright’s *Native Son* to evoke the parallel – but not intersecting – situation of women: ‘He [the Black protagonist] watches planes pass and knows that because he is black the sky is out of bounds for him. Because she is woman, the girl knows that the sea and the poles, a thousand adventures, a thousand joys are forbidden to her: she is born on the wrong side.’ ⁸ It does not seem to occur to her that one could be oppressed by both of these systems of discrimination – race and gender.

In later portions of the book, de Beauvoir shifts her attention to the uniqueness of women’s oppression. Unlike Black or Jewish people, she argues, women cannot trace their oppression back to some historical event. Thus she obscures the sufferings and subjugation of women of colour, once again positioning the class of ‘women’ as white and Christian. Categories such as these determine the epistemic foundations of feminism. The focus on women as white excludes women of colour both from the philosophical category which is staked out here and from historical frames of reference. Even as she purports to take on the study of women in history, de Beauvoir

elects to focus only on women in the West and more specifically France, dispensing with the rest of history in a footnote. ⁹

Nor is that West-centric footnote the only one in *The Second Sex* that is problematic. In another, she comments that ‘The history of woman in the East, in India, in China, has been in effect that of a long and unchanging slavery’. ¹⁰ Was she not aware that, two years prior to her book’s publication, Indian women had managed to overthrow the British Empire and won the franchise? Elsewhere, de Beauvoir explains the particular and special character of gender relations in the modern West: The more the male becomes individualized and lays claim to his individuality, the more certainly he will recognize also in his companion an individual and a free being. The Oriental, careless of his own fate, is content with a female who is for him a means of enjoyment; but the dream of the Occidental, once he rises to consciousness of his own uniqueness, is to be taken cognizance of by another free being, at once strange and docile. ¹¹

De Beauvoir’s own assumptions about Western consciousness and progress are boosted by her thoughtless reiterations of common stereotypes of her place and time, in which the ‘Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life of Oriental ease, in a state of Oriental despotism and sensuality’; the Orient itself is ‘separate, eccentric, backward, silently indifferent, femininely penetrable’; and the narrative of human progress unfolds in the West ‘against the timeless culturally static oriental who never quite rises to the occasion of human freedom and history’. ¹²

Just as de Beauvoir dismisses Indian women as trapped in perpetual slavery, she constantly uses the word ‘slavery’ to describe the condition of women, by which we now know she meant only white women. Yet through her visits to America and access to libraries, she should have known about the particular horrors faced by Black women who had experienced actual slavery. There are noxious whiffs here of the beliefs that British suffragists held, that in being companions to white men, the most evolved of all men, white women automatically deserved equality and better treatment than the women of ‘savage’ and ‘uncivilized’ men.

Today, Simone de Beauvoir has been elevated as a timeless feminist heroine. Yet through her powerful influence, her belief in Western cultural supremacy and the essentialization of the white woman as the model for all

women became baked into the very epistemology of feminism. Successors like Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* – who called de Beauvoir ‘an intellectual heroine of our history’ and credited her with having started her on the road of feminism ¹³ – have repeated her mistakes. Friedan focused on the anomie, ‘problem with no name’, experienced by white middle-class and upper-class women whose sole focus was on their homes, their children and their husbands; and like de Beauvoir, Friedan essentialized ‘women’ to mean women like her.

In the 1970s, another successor to de Beauvoir, the American radical feminist Kate Millett, tried to do better in forging solidarity with non-Western women. She had given theoretical foundation to what became known as second-wave feminism in a book called *Sexual Politics*. The book is a sharp amalgam of literary criticism and sociological study that dissects the work of Western intellectual heroes such as Norman Mailer, John Ruskin and Henry Miller, to expose how patriarchy serves as the core organizing principle in American society. One commentator credited her with having ‘destroyed the authority of the male author’. ¹⁴

I loved *Sexual Politics* when I read it decades later (just as I had loved de Beauvoir before discovering her orientalist bigotry). I admired Millett’s irreverence and was also attracted to her interest in feminist solidarity, built on a sort of radical questioning. As author and radical feminist Alix Kates Shulman wrote, the book tries to breed in its readers a healthy ‘epistemological skepticism’ – a robust questioning of the foundations of knowledge that produce a certain idea, text or philosophy. ¹⁵ The purpose of this scepticism is to look at the world without considering any foundational truths as unassailable, or existing in isolation.

Millett modelled the feminist ‘as standing in opposition to many given truths’, comfortable in her reading of the world through a gender lens. And at a time when America was in the midst of a sexual revolution, she argued that sex was not just sex after all. Sex between a man and a woman was a matter of power and hence of politics.

Her scepticism towards the literary canon created by white men could also be applied to the collusion of racial privilege and feminist thought. Just as she unravelled the unequal power dynamics of the heterosexual sexual encounter, particularly as it was reflected in the mostly male Western

literary canon, so too is 'feminist solidarity' a political project that inherently involves conflict and contestation. It cannot be a tasty amalgam of meetings and conferences and photo ops and lectures. Constructing a true feminist solidarity involves exposing and excavating the supremacy of whiteness from within feminism today. But even Millett found it harder to subject herself, and the domination of white women within feminism, to the same sort of epistemological scepticism that she applied to the 'love'-making scenes in the literature of white men.

A lesbian socialist feminist who believed in a robust internationalism, Millett decided in 1979 to test her own universalism against the reality of working in solidarity with feminists who were not white or American. Idealistic and well intentioned (like so many other white feminists, then and now), Millett was interested in collaborating with other women on the basis of equality and mutual learning, one that was attendant to the power differences that race and nationality and class had dealt. So, she decided to travel to Iran.

She knew a little bit about the country, and in the years and months before she ended up in Iran, Millett had been critical about America's foreign policy, in particular its meddling in Iran – not least its installation of the Shah in a CIA-orchestrated coup. Nonetheless, she seemed a bit unprepared when she arrived in Tehran: The first sight of them was terrible. Like black birds, like death, like fate, like everything alien. Foreign, dangerous, unfriendly. There were hundreds of them, specters crowding the barrier, waiting their own. A sea of chadori, the long terrible veil, the full length of it, like a dress descending to the floor, ancient, powerful, annihilating us. [16](#)

These Iranian women hardly seemed suitable for the project of feminist political solidarity that the young Millett, raised as she was on the unrest of the '60s and the transformations of the '70s, had come to execute in Iran.

Things improved after Millett and her lover, journalist Sophie Keir, met up with activists from the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran (CAIFI), the group that had invited her to participate in their celebration of International Women's Day. Most if not all were affiliated with the communist Tudeh Party and had protested the Shah for years. During his regime, the Shah had banned the celebration of International

Women's Day, preferring Iranian women to celebrate the anniversary of the day when the old Shah had ordered they remove their veils. So CAIFI made a point of including veiled women in their programme, to underscore that the issue of veiling or not veiling was not the basis of true progressivism, and that political freedom was at the centre of their left-wing populism.

Fervent and idealistic, young and chic with a disdain for fear, these activists, who had spent the preceding months protesting in the streets of Tehran, cast a spell on Millett. The early days of her visit were full of political tumult: marching in the streets, huddling and planning in this or that hotel room or apartment. During this time, Millett realized that the covering and uncovering of women was part of the political theatre of the revolution, and had a political significance that was more complicated than she had assumed when she imagined veiled women as predatory birds during her first hour in the country. While most of the women in CAIFI did not wear the veil, they were insistent on being inclusive of women who did, believing that solidarity between *all* women was what ultimately mattered; they knew too that in the country's post-Shah future, they could not afford to alienate religiously conservative Iranian women. They wanted to show Iranians as a whole, and Iranian women in particular, that the Left and the Tudeh Party stood for political freedom for all women, not the superficial modernity that removing the veil implied.

The idea that veiled women had political identities and feminist views was news to Millett. In her account of the International Women's Day event itself, she describes the first speaker, who 'had four of her sons shot down in the insurrection', not as a predatory bird but rather as adorned in a 'beautiful garment', her words those of 'a firebrand'. ¹⁷

But despite her eagerness and openness to learning and understanding, Kate Millett could not completely shed the role of the white woman in charge that white feminists tend to assume when surrounded by women of colour. Nor, more sadly, could she apply the idea of epistemological scepticism she had pioneered to expose the power differentials involved in the heterosexual sexual encounter to the power differential between herself and her Iranian feminist counterparts. Whiteness and Westernness, then as now, confer privilege and power regardless of the consent of those endowed. Often white women play along, pretending these were earned, or

that they don't exist. This was evident once Kate Millett came before the foreign press.

From the start, Millett wanted Iranian women to engage with the international press *themselves*, but she seemed blind to the possibility that in a country fed up with US meddling, ignoring the Western press might itself be a political position of the female freedom fighters who wanted their own anti-American credentials to be clear. These women fighters with whom Millett was so enamoured did not share her eagerness to engage with the Western media, and were focused instead on the protests that would transform Iran rather than the narrative being conveyed to the Western world.

Faced by a Western press eager to treat her as a spokesperson for the Iranian Women's Movement, Millett convinced herself that she was in fact such a representative of Iranian women to 'the rest of the world', and that controlling the narrative of Iranian women was too important to quibble about whether she had the right to serve in the role. 'At this moment I am feminist in a fight they are calling espionage, imperialist provocation or anything they can get away with,' she wrote. 'If I can tell my side, the truth has a chance, I have a chance, all the women here have a chance to go on.'

[18](#)

Noble sentiments, but they cloaked the simple fact that a white woman had once again put herself in charge of speaking for women who were not white. Millett had deployed the automatic legitimacy conferred upon her – a white American woman – by other Westerners, to centre herself in a struggle for freedom and justice that was far beyond her knowledge or experience. Not all Iranian women appreciated this.

Gloria Steinem and Simone de Beauvoir had also been invited by CAIFI to participate in the International Women's Day celebrations – and declined to attend. Yet Millett took pains in her speech to portray these fellow Western feminists as having genuine concern about their sisters in Iran. She began with 'greetings from Gloria [Steinem], Robin [Morgan] and Angela Davis'. In reality, Millett noted, most of the famous women like Steinem had given her the runaround, ignoring her messages and not returning her calls.

This too-busy-to-call-back attitude transformed just as soon as the world realized that a revolution was underway in Iran. Suddenly, all the VIP feminists wanted to get in on the action, and Millett had to explain to Gloria Steinem on the phone why more white women were not likely to do any good (Steinem's one-time CIA employment may have posed a particular problem) and would divert attention from the Iranian women themselves. Instead, she pleaded for 'bread [money] for offices, a publication' and help with getting articles placed so 'they know you're with them'. No such practical help ever arrived (except in the shape of a loan from French feminists to pay Millett and Keir's hotel bill). Not long after her phone call with Steinem, Millett herself was deported from Iran.

As an otherwise lesser star in the white feminist firmament, Millett became territorial about Iranian women following her visit, and began to function as an expert on what others should do. Within this white feminist conversation, Iranian women were peripheral and Millett's being brave enough to be there first became primary. Like most white feminists, she explained her wrong-headed role as spokeswoman as a matter of good intentions. She had wanted to help – even if she had never been able to answer her own question: 'How do you help – how in the hell do you help?'
[19](#)

At the time of Millett's trip, Kimberlé Crenshaw's landmark paper in which she coined the term 'intersectionality', arguing that race and gender should *both* be considered in legal cases involving Black women plaintiffs, was still a decade in the future. Crenshaw's logic applied to Millett's sojourn to Iran would have suggested that Iranian feminists' religio-cultural identity was just as important to understanding their situation as their gender, and that their political positions were more complex than a visiting white woman might immediately grasp. Millett's tacit assumption that feminism in Iran should follow the same model as Western feminism – including its strategic use of the media – was a failure at such multidimensional understanding.

In theory, some white feminists today seem eager for a reckoning of the role of whiteness within feminism. The hesitation, the discomfort, the squirming in seats and ultimately the turning away comes later, when foundational texts or long-adored heroines become the subject of the reckoning.

Epistemological scepticism has the potential to uncover theoretical infirmities, cloaked bigotry or just blatant racism – and so it is a vital tool for white feminists themselves to apply in resisting the pull of white feminism.

Can we take what is useful from de Beauvoir and Millett's pioneering texts while also exposing and excising their underpinnings of white privilege and (in some cases) bigotry? Or should writers with racist and West-centric failings be eliminated from the story of feminism altogether? In the reckoning that must take place in order for feminism to represent all women, feminists must question whether excising one or another idea from a heroine's corpus can still permit the remainder to stand. De Beauvoir's work is at the centre of many white feminist awakenings, but her erasure of Black women, her dismissal of Brown women, is also embedded in her idea of the 'self' and the 'other'.

The cases of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett reveal the lack of epistemological room in white feminist theory for a true understanding of women who are impacted by more than one system of oppression. De Beauvoir undoubtedly recognized both race and gender as potential systems of oppression, but still imagined that race-based oppression happened to Black men and gender-based oppression happened to white women. And despite her radical leftism, Millett could not, for example, understand why her easy assumption of the role of spokesperson trampled over the possibility of the very solidarity that she and her white feminist sisters were so eager to achieve. But by bringing together the intellectual tools of Millett's epistemological scepticism and Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality, can a true feminist solidarity finally be born?

If women of colour have roles in white feminism today, they are cameos, the supporting cast or the targets of pity – grasping for survival, or for a school, or a health clinic – rather than whole and complex humans. We are expected to be tellers of sad stories, where we detail how our particularly brutal men, our inherently flawed culture, our singularly draconian religion (but never the actions or inaction of white people) have caused us indescribable pain. For their part, white feminists offer us their precious and perhaps their righteous indignation at the savagery of our native cultures, which have left us in such a hopeless mess, pitifully but patiently waiting for their interventions (by force or by money) to sort things out.



3

The White Saviour Industrial Complex and the Ungrateful Brown Feminist For a long time, development professionals, NGOs and the United Nations have been trying to eradicate wood-burning stoves in rural India. In the 1990s, after the Beijing Declaration set out the vague agenda of ‘equality, development and peace for all women’, the eradication of wood-burning stoves became the focus of feminists, modernization advocates, environmental activists and a slew of other reformers. Together, they set about tackling the task of liberating rural Indian women to participate in a wage-earning economy, by giving them a better stove than the one that, according to excavations in the area, had been in use since 1800 BC. The project would deliver empowerment and cleaner air, and would end the depletion of forests. In 2010, the United Nations’ Global Alliance for Clean Stoves promised to distribute 100 million ‘clean stoves’ by 2020. The World Bank amassed a \$130 million portfolio from thirteen donor countries for the provision of clean stoves.

But no one asked the women who did the cooking whether they wanted the new stoves, or considered the reasons why, as it turned out, they did not want them: for one, collecting fuelwood (which does not involve the cutting down of whole trees or have the environmental impact it was alleged to

have) had been for centuries a ritual in which rural women established and maintained their social bonds. It was in these exchanges that they discussed how to solve problems in their lives and how to overcome the many hardships faced by their communities, and shared their joys and losses, as well as news of relatives and friends. It was an essential part of the women-only socialization in these areas. In addition, the new stoves were incompatible with the preparation of certain recipes, which required a traditional stove and had been part of the local culture for centuries. Furthermore, when the clean stoves broke down they could not be repaired easily in the village, while the old stoves could. ¹

Perhaps even more importantly, many of these rural Indian women rejected the idea that the route to empowerment was making themselves available for wage-earning work rather than the literal tending of their own hearths – the cooking and caring for the household from that central point, which they saw as an exercise of power. Adhering to traditional recipes and cooking methods that required the old stoves was a reflection of their own commitment to the heritage they saw as sustaining their own and their families' lives.

According to researchers, the commercial forestry industry, the clearing of land for agricultural use, and urbanization each have a much more significant impact on deforestation than the collection of fuelwood. ² The traditional stoves do pollute, they do create smoky interiors, they do require a lot of labour on the part of the women who use them, who can experience breathing issues because of them – and who surely have ideas about improving them. A solution is needed, but it cannot be a solution that only makes sense to affluent, white, Western programme managers; it has to be a solution that works for rural Indian women.

In its original iterations, 'empowerment' was understood as something notably different from its relative meaninglessness today. In 1984, an Indian feminist named Gita Sen got together with a group of feminist researchers, activists and political leaders from the Global South to form DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). Based in Bangalore, this collective sought to push forward women's voices from the Global South. ³ As they are now, the terms of 'international development', or aid disbursements to post-colonial nations, were predominantly dictated

by the Global North – and included imposing the goals of white Western feminists upon women who were neither white nor Western and did not necessarily share their concerns.

In their book *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions*, based on the DAWN collective's work, Sen – a founding member of the collective – and her co-author, Caren Grown, acidly write: Perhaps because the Western feminist movement (especially in the U.S.) gained strength in the late 1960s and the early 1970s during most of which time employment, social services, and incomes (at least of the white majority) were relatively insulated from the shocks of the world economy, gaining parity with men often took centre stage for the mainstream of the movement. ⁴

Enraptured with the ideal of equality between the sexes in the educational and professional spaces they saw opportunities to access, white Western feminists largely ignored poorer women and Black and Brown women, who were making the argument that 'equality with men who themselves suffered employment, low wages, poor work conditions and racism within existing socioeconomic structures did not seem an adequate or worthy goal'. ⁵

Sen was not arguing for doing away with equality as a feminist goal altogether as much as noting how the agenda of feminism, internationally and particularly within aid and development, was being set by what appealed to white middle-class women in the United States and Europe. So she and the DAWN feminists conceived the 'empowerment approach', led by the understanding that the existing white-led, top-down paradigms of development had not delivered any real change in conditions for women in the Global South. Instead, they argued for a bottom-up approach – that grass-roots organizations could be the actual 'catalysts of women's visions and perspectives' and spearhead the structural changes that were necessary within societies. At the centre of DAWN's vision of empowerment was '*political* mobilization', supported by education, and the promotion of development 'free of *all* forms of oppression based on sex, class, race or nationality'. ⁶

Anti-racism and political engagement were thus crucial to the emerging idea of 'empowerment' from the Global South. Sen's and DAWN's work invigorated other feminists from the Global South to speak out and refine the concept all through the 1980s. Indian researcher and activist Srilatha

Batliwala, for instance, defined empowerment as a process ‘of transforming power relationships between individuals and social groups’. ⁷ Batliwala argued that a feminist stance requires scepticism towards all existing forms of power and an avid questioning of the ideologies that justify women’s subordination. Sen, Batliwala and other feminists from the Global South differentiated ‘empowerment’ from ‘power’: the latter is simply a system of domination; the former ‘a collective political power used by grass-roots organizations’ to get things done. These feminists were after something very different from simply grabbing the wheel of the status quo from men and steering the ship themselves.

When DAWN and Sen came up with the idea of empowerment, few development agencies were interested in it. A good number of them, along with their donor organizations, thought it was too radical a concept. Governments all ignored it, providing it with no support in their agendas. Also silent were powerful organizations like the American National Organization for Women. Western feminists at the time, including those working in global development or at the helm of other international organizations, were loath to support ‘political’ projects.

Eventually, however, the term began to gain some acceptance. In 1994, ten years after the formation of DAWN, at the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, Sen’s definition of empowerment received international recognition on the UN conference circuit. An even greater victory came the following year, at the United Nations’ Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing, with the acceptance of a platform for action that described itself as ‘an agenda for the empowerment of women’, seeking ‘women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society’. ⁸

The victory was a double-edged sword for the feminists who had originally pushed for the empowerment of the Global South. Usage of the term climbed steadily, both in the world of development and in the discourse of mainstream Western feminism, but its definition became more and more vague – and more and more disconnected from the idea of collective political action.

Development, as it existed in the imaginations of Western would-be saviours, had no room for political agitation, as that might reduce Western

donors' power over the recipients. Short-term aid enhanced that power while salving white consciences, but devising alternative political structures could prove incompatible with or even challenge the ways the West built its wealth over the long term. Empowerment in its original sense could never be integrated into the foreign-aid blueprint of development. So, even though the feminists of DAWN had argued so fervently against top-down programmes that sidelined the perspectives of the women themselves, aid disbursement continued to be donor-determined – it simply had a new label for this old model.

If the clean stove programme avoided the consideration of culture when planning an interventionist aid initiative, subsequent feminist development programmes actively demonized culture as the source of women's backwardness and hardship, using this distraction to avoid any talk of politics altogether. For example, an anti-honour-killing programme in Pakistan running from the 1990s condemned the local beliefs that led to honour killings. And yet it failed to provide any local-level support for the kind of educative political discussions that would allow women to challenge and change the toxic masculinity that lay behind these cultural beliefs. The result of the long-term funding for this programme was that legislative measures against honour killing were successfully passed but subsequent years saw no reduction in the numbers of killings themselves. ⁹ While the law existed on the books, the failure to bring about social and cultural transformation – of the kind that Gita Sen had envisioned – meant that the crime itself continued to be perpetuated.

Under the cover of technocratic policy mandates and elaborate monitoring procedures, many development programmes encourage the depoliticization of issues, even where politics are at the very core of the situation they're attempting to address. ¹⁰ Interviews with female cadres demobilizing during peace talks in Colombia since 2012 reveal how this plays out: 'These NGOs ... brought in by Santos's government, told us they were neutral. They offered us the opportunity to learn to style hair or make-up. They did ask if we wanted sewing machines.' ¹¹ The women had gone so far as to take up arms because they wanted to fight for independence. Handing out sewing machines sought to domesticate women who had a strong political identity, and the NGO never considered that this flew in the

face of their larger project of ‘empowering’ women to enable them to advocate for their own welfare. Even though the very reason for an NGO presence was political, they saw their role as technocratic, with politics as a nuisance that made their job harder. In this way, instances of political resistance are ‘NGO-ized’.

By 2000, ‘empowerment’ appeared alongside ‘opportunity’ and ‘security’ as the three pillars of the World Bank’s programme for the fight against poverty – aligning the concept of empowerment with capitalist values of growth and wealth creation (opportunity) and conservative, anti-revolutionary politics (security). By 2006, the World Bank had veered even further away from empowerment’s original precepts, coupling it explicitly with economic power and progress: The global community must renew its attention to women’s economic empowerment and increase investments in women ... women will benefit from their economic empowerment, but so too will men, children and society as a whole ... In sum, the business case for expanding women’s economic opportunities is becoming increasingly evident. [12](#)

Not only did social and political transformation not get any mention; the sole reason for investing in women at all was that it made good business sense. [13](#)

The World Bank was not alone; throughout the 2000s, governmental and non-governmental aid organizations offered an array of definitions of what could now be called ‘empowerment-lite’, with the political dropped altogether – deemed too radical. Though many wanted to give money to the poor or to women’s programmes, any overt linkages between poor women and political mobilization – hinting that the women might be poor at least in part *because* of politics that the donors supported or enforced – were too threatening to their self-concept as benevolent grantors.

Development agencies frequently separated political empowerment and economic empowerment into distinct budget lines, so that there was little possibility of joining the dots between the two. This split also reinforced the association of empowerment with formal institutions and individual autonomy (rather than grass-roots organizations and collective gains). And even with that privileging of the cult of autonomy, the emphasis was on the economic actor contributing to ‘growth’, in the sense of GDP and profit,

rather than on the qualitative experience of the work, for example, or on the unpaid care economy – not to mention experiences and concerns beyond the world of work altogether, such as bodily autonomy.

The years following the UN conference in Beijing also saw an evolving definition of what constituted ‘value’. In the wake of capitalism’s presumed triumph in the Cold War, value has meant the possibility that any woman could go out and get a job and thus monetize her time. Now everyone – from the development subject whose uplift was being strategized, to the white feminists in Geneva or New York who were strategizing it – had to maximize their value.

Again, the clean stove project is an example of how Western preconceptions about what constitutes real work seeped into development programmes imposed on non-Western cultures. In the eyes of rural Indian women, they were already working and their labour was already essential without it becoming a part of the wage economy. On the other hand, the paid labour roles available to them would be menial, physically punishing jobs such as breaking up rocks at construction sites or in the agricultural fields as farmhands. The promised empowerment lay not in the menial jobs that women would do, but in the economic and hence decision-making power they would presumably gain within the household from the income they would make. These women saw that working a menial job outside the home might yield a bit more cash, but that did not compensate for the loss of involvement and oversight in their home sphere, which they valued much more highly. In the calculations made to value the women as wage earners, the idea of what the women themselves valued was lost.

The conviction that human value and empowerment require participation in the cash economy coincided with the rise of neoliberalism – the prioritizing of free market conditions while packaging international economic policy in the glib jargon of social justice. In actual terms, it converted, as political theorist Wendy Brown puts it, ‘homo politicus’ into ‘homo economicus’.

On the aid end of the spectrum, neoliberalism required foreign assistance to gloss over the ugly reality of what free markets were doing in the Global South. Rich Western countries funded microloans for women in Bangladesh; while Bangladeshi textile manufacturers faced high tariffs if they tried to export their products to the West, and Western clothing

companies exploited local female labour with impunity. Similarly, encouraging the inclusion of women in peace negotiations in Nigeria might distract the public from what large transnational oil corporations, with blessings from their allies in Western states, were doing to local populations by destroying local ecosystems, livelihoods and farmland.

In 2007, Srilatha Batliwala, one of the women who had pushed for the inclusion of political and social transformation in the original definition of empowerment, showed how its meaning had become a ‘technical magic bullet’ that referred to things like microcredit programmes. ‘As a neoliberal tool,’ she argued, ‘empowerment is now conceptualized to subvert the politics that the concept was meant to symbolize.’ ¹⁴ It was still overwhelmingly associated with women, but with a depoliticized, consumerist wave of feminism which had risen through the nineties and noughties.

The evolution of empowerment into a ‘fuzzword’ could be pinned to numerous motives. Rosalind Eyben and Rebecca Napier-Moore argue that the ambiguity allowed everyone who heard it to attach their own meanings to the term, thus pleasing all but also allowing them to remain non-committal about its meaning. The new fuzzy empowerment enabled everyone from the president of the World Bank, selling a billion-dollar microcredit programme, to the feminist collective making beaded necklaces to claim they were furthering the same cause.

One decade on from the UN’s official acceptance of the term, no one in the West, including its leading feminists, seemed to remember that the concept of empowerment had been introduced by feminists from the Global South. And the idea that empowerment was primarily a Brown feminist political project had been erased from mainstream development work. Empowerment was now tied up with a more individualistic notion of power: synonymous with individual capacity, self-realization and aspiration. Sen’s radical idea of a ‘liberating empowerment’ had become something entirely different – ‘liberal empowerment’, or the maximization of individual economic interests.

Rather than actually empowering those on the receiving end of aid programmes, the development community tends to envision them as helpless, backwards, pre-Enlightenment versions of white Western women,

whose social and cultural differences are problems to be solved and whose actual problems can be swiftly dispatched using methods which have been tailored to the needs of white people. If the architects of the clean stove initiative had consulted the rural Indian women properly, the flaws in its premise would have been immediately apparent. Indians were instrumental to the initiative and subsequent implementation of the programmes, but these Indians belonged to the urban middle class. Women in the cities, seeing themselves as more feminist and modern, were eager to collaborate with international feminist efforts. They too were enthusiastic about delivering rural Indian women from what appeared to them to be pure drudgery. Often the assent of the cadre of local development workers, already eager to identify with the West and its agenda, permits agencies like the UN and their programme directors to tick the box for local consultation.

Meanwhile, the underlying premise was not only that rural Indian women had to be taught empowerment through white programmatic interventions, but that they were ignorant and apolitical and had no existing ideas or beliefs regarding their own welfare. There is no centring of the woman to be ‘empowered’ here, just the assumption that help will be given in the form deemed most useful by the white donor – and the poor Brown woman will gratefully accept it.

Trickle-down feminism, where a solution is developed at the top (by those with the most privilege), is not intersectional feminism; it is dictatorial feminism. This trickle-down framework fosters initiatives like the Gates Foundation’s chicken programme, which aimed to provide individual women with a degree of economic autonomy via gifting them chickens. Like the clean stoves initiative, such endeavours not only overlook women’s complex cultural and social identities, but bring a tunnel-visioned focus on the individual as ‘entrepreneur’ rather than on the capacity of women as a collective to bring about social and political change.

In 2016, the Gates Foundation collaborated with Heifer International to donate 100,000 chickens to individual women in some of the world’s poorest countries, estimating that a woman with five hens could make \$1,000 a year from selling the eggs, use the profits to buy more chickens and hence grow her own business. ¹⁵ In a long post about the programme on Medium, Melinda Gates opined that ‘a chicken can mean the difference

between a family that merely survives and one that thrives'. Chickens were also deemed exceptional as a tool for women's empowerment because 'many men don't think chickens are worth their time', leaving the women to tend them and (with the help of the Gates Foundation) become empowered independently from their menfolk. ¹⁶ The burgeoning numbers of women chicken entrepreneurs would enable the Gates Foundation to claim that they had directly delivered empowerment to tens of thousands of women.

Yet even while Bill and Melinda Gates were touting the benefits, researchers had already pointed out that there was no evidence that chickens provided long-term economic advancement, let alone the empowerment of half of the population. In Mozambique, where the idea had already been tried out, studies found that while women could make some money in the short term, they were unable to make the chickens a successful commercial venture because large chicken producers, with their economies of scale, were able to produce cheaper eggs. This meant the women could at best make \$100 a year. ¹⁷

One country earmarked to receive the chickens – Bolivia – called the Gates initiative 'offensive' and declined the offer. César Cocarico, Bolivia's minister for land and rural development, said, 'He [Bill Gates] does not know Bolivia's reality to think we are living 500 years ago, in the middle of the jungle not knowing how to produce,' adding: 'Respectfully, he should stop talking about Bolivia, and once he knows more, apologize to us.' ¹⁸ No apology, of course, was forthcoming. Bolivia is a major chicken producer, where commercial farmers produce 197 million chickens annually.

Imagine: what if, in the poorest rural and urban parts of the United States, where surely development assistance is needed, white feminists created a blanket plan to foster gender equality and empowerment by giving every woman a chicken or a sewing machine or a microloan? But the chicken initiative was touted in all its promotional material as a project focusing on families in sub-Saharan Africa (or 'Africa poor', as the BBC News headline crisply put it ¹⁹). It is amazing what you can get away with, in defiance of basic logic about how the modern world works, if you're 'helping Africa' or other parts of the Global South. White Western women are seen as

participants in complex modern societies; their problems cannot be solved with a single neat gift. Brown and Black women are imagined to exist in a much simpler world, held back from success by very basic issues that have very basic solutions.

Similar sorts of programmes abound, all focusing on women's relative lack of parity in the developing world. Sometimes, they are funded by the scions of corporations who are looking for some strategic virtue signalling to cover up activities that deplete developing countries of the resources that would actually lift its citizens, women included, out of poverty. At other times, they are promoted by Western governments who want to cover up their neoliberal plans to expand influence within a certain region. The empowerment of women and girls sounds good to political donors and ordinary voters alike.

Yet these sorts of allegedly empowering interventions conveniently delink the current condition of women from colonial histories, global capital expansion, transnational investment and the continued exploitation of feminine labour. ²⁰ Women, it is assumed, are poor because of their culture or their lack of agency or even their feminist consciousness, and not because colonial plunder depleted resources or because current capitalist investment interests calculate their value based on the lowest wage they can be paid to make T-shirts or jeans. The fact that poor countries like Vietnam or Bangladesh cannot compete at the global level without capitulating to these corporate demands (investors will simply turn elsewhere and exploit the women of some other poor country) is not considered. Nor is any attention paid to the fact that all of these forces – from corporatization to neo-imperial interventions – direct the women away from the political consciousness that could actually give them the tools to fight back.

Similarly absent is any mention of military invasions, the securitization of borders, and global financial crises, all of which have disastrous effects on the welfare of women and girls. But Western aid is often used both as a pretext for war and a means to whitewash its terrible humanitarian costs.

In 2001, shortly after the US invasion of Afghanistan, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) began implementing one of the largest disbursements of development aid in history: a programme called Promote. Touted as 'the world's biggest program ever designed

purely for female empowerment’, it was intended to help 75,000 Afghan women get jobs, internships and promotions. ²¹ They would be given training in conducting advocacy and encouraged to set up civil organizations, gaining the leadership skills needed for Afghanistan’s bright new future.

In September 2018, seventeen years later, the *New York Times* published a report that showed how terribly it had failed in this mission. ²² It was, in the words of SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction), ‘a failure and a waste of taxpayers’ money’. A lot of money: the programme cost \$280 million, most of which, according to the *Times* report, was allotted to administrative costs and payments to US contractors. In an interview, Rula Ghani, the First Lady of Afghanistan, pointed out several problems with the programme, including that the girls selected were too young and politically inexperienced to put their training to any good use. She included an exhortation: ‘Anybody working in development, take time to sit down with the local population. Take time to listen to them. They know their situation better than anyone else.’ ²³

Trying perhaps to remain in the good books of USAID administrators (to ensure future aid disbursements), Ghani did not bring up the official reports directly to them. In some cases, women who attended a single workshop on women’s leadership were counted as having benefitted from the programme, without any further contact or follow-up demonstrating how the training had helped their long-term prospects. Elsewhere, metrics of ‘deliverables’ were lowered, such that only 20 women out of 3,000 receiving employment and leadership training would have had to find a job with the Afghan civil service for the job training component of the programme to be considered a success. But even that number was not ‘delivered’. In the end, the SIGAR report noted, only 55 women could have been said to have benefitted from the programme – a far cry from the 75,000 target.

For its part, USAID continued to peddle the premise of success. In its formal response to SIGAR, the agency stubbornly insisted that Promote had ‘directly benefited 50,000 Afghan women with the training and support they need to engage in advocacy for women’s issues, enter the work force and start their own businesses’. ²⁴

The aid-industrial complex is a massive part of the global economy, estimated to be worth more than \$130 billion per annum, ²⁵ money that is funnelled through to governments, aid agencies, transnational NGOs and the thousands of people that work for them. ²⁶ The leadership of this massive system comprises mostly white and Western development professionals, who are charged with formulating the programmes and policies through which aid will be disbursed. The image of the white Westerner as saviour, then, is not only a pervasive stereotype; it is built into the organizational and policy-making architecture of the aid-industrial complex.

The aid-industrial complex is steeped in an inherent power dynamic that mirrors the racialized wealth differential across the globe, in which those who have systematically extracted and accumulated wealth (historically, through stolen resources and stolen labour) hold structural power over people of colour (who have been on the receiving end of this exploitation, and the violence and oppression required to enact it). White and Western charity donors will eagerly donate money for girls' education in Bangladesh, but they will not accept a reduction in shareholder profits from corporations operating in Bangladesh's female-dominated garment sector, so that those women can work fewer hours in better conditions. The implied goodness of the charitable act thus works to erase complicity in a transnational system that is instrumental in enforcing global racial hierarchies.

This racial hierarchy also operates within the aid sector itself. Most policy-makers and programme directors at major development NGOs are white, Western and are paid salaries astronomically higher than those paid to locals working for the same NGO and doing the same job. In an essay titled 'International Development Has a Race Problem', Angela Bruce-Raeburn, regional advocacy director for Africa for the Global Health Advocacy Incubator, affirms that: Inherent in the very concept of aid is race and racism because only in this system can majority white societies with ample resources determine what poor black and brown people need, how much they need, set up parameters for the delivery of what they need, and of course create an elaborate mechanism for monitoring how well they have managed the donated funds to meet their needs. ²⁷

When women of colour do get into programmatic roles, they continue to face discrimination and are often denied leadership positions. One African woman, Corinne Gray, described her experience working at the United Nations in Geneva as rife with racism. ‘While I was at the UN, it was my skin colour that got in the way of advancing,’ she wrote, adding that ‘the good lady in charge of making this decision’ told her that she could not be selected for a leadership position because she ‘wouldn’t be able to command any respect’. At times, she was told to change both her tone and her personality, which were read as too strong and confrontational, even as she witnessed her white male boss yell at people and refer to her female colleagues as ‘cunts’. ²⁸

A recent staff survey of UN employees in Geneva backed up her descriptions, with one out of three workers surveyed saying that they had either experienced or seen someone else experience racial discrimination and 59 per cent admitting that the UN was not good at dealing with racial discrimination. ²⁹ Given all of this, it was a dark moment when, at the start of the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the death of George Floyd in 2020, the UN Secretary-General told staff in New York that they were banned from attending. (Widespread outcry forced him to reverse his decision, but the original sentiment and intention were crystal clear. ³⁰) An absence of women of colour in leadership roles means that there is no one to question the hypocrisy when donors are presented as the face of white benevolence while routinely undercutting the power of the same women they are purporting to help, by investing in or leading companies that exploit women workers. Feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies the well-worn trope of the ‘rescue mission’ – saving Black and Brown women and girls (inherently helpless and primitive) from their woe-filled realities while masking histories of oppression perpetuated by those white saviours. Silencing the voices of the women involved and sustaining the operative logic of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’, such advocates of development aid would never consider, for example, supporting women in the garment industry in Bangladesh who are trying to unionize to agitate politically for better working conditions. No large garment corporation has ever committed to using only unionized factories

and thus empowering these women; instead, they donate to and elevate only those causes that fall within the rescue mission model. [31](#)

Gita Sen was invited to submit an expert paper for the autumn 2019 pre-meeting of the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing – planned for the spring, then cancelled due to COVID-19 concerns. It is a glum document, one in which Sen still tries to draw attention to ‘human development’ in a world obsessed with ‘economic growth’, while noting that women’s rights, social mobilization and empowerment are confronted by even more retrogressive policies now than they were twenty-five years ago. [32](#) ‘Feminist mobilizing does not happen in a socioeconomic or political vacuum ... Nor can it be effective simply through the volition or intent of women’s organizations if the environment and institutions are not supportive,’ Sen notes. Strategies for progress during such a time have to be ‘defensive and protective’ and focused on alliances. [33](#)

When she wrote the paper, Sen was no doubt gearing up for the tussle that was expected to take place when the Beijing+25 conference began in New York in March 2020. A global gag order issued by the Trump administration in 2017 forbade any NGO from receiving any money from the US if their work touched on abortion, and the United States had allied with China and Saudi Arabia to ensure that there would be no mention of reproductive rights in the conference resolutions. [34](#)

Individual economic power was still considered empowering, but bodily autonomy was now deleted from the platform altogether. Making no mention of political transformation at all, the ‘political declaration’ drafted by the members of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women failed to present any meaningful path forward for the world’s women. [35](#)



4

White Feminists and Feminist Wars

‘I’m fine,’ the pale, red-haired Jessica Chastain says as she takes off her black jumpsuit and face mask. The scene is from Kathryn Bigelow’s 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty*, which despite the banality of the dialogue says a lot about a new flavour of feminism that has evolved in the Western world since 9/11. In the film, Chastain plays a CIA ‘targeter’ named Maya who is physically delicate but tough as nails in every other way, which in this particular conversation means that she is up for carrying out torture. In fact, that is what she and her male CIA colleague have been doing inside a makeshift bunker – the activity that has rendered Maya ‘fine’. ‘We should go back in,’ she tells her co-torturer, after they have rested a minute from the hard toils of inflicting extreme pain on other human beings. Here is gender equality at its most perverse: a white woman trying her best to show a white man that she has as much of an appetite for cruelty as he does. And her laconic male colleagues appear to approve. ‘She’s a killer,’ her boss observes as she disappears down a hallway.

If this were an entirely fictional film, all of it could be discarded as the morbid fantasy of some Hollywood director. As it happens, the character of Maya is drawn from the life of a very real CIA sleuth, whose identity the Agency has never released but to whose gritty greatness it has made many pointed allusions. ‘Maya’ (along with others – mostly women, according to CIA sources) was responsible for the capture and killing of Osama bin

Laden in May 2011. *Zero Dark Thirty* may be a souped-up, cinematically slick, action-packed retelling of what the real Maya managed to do, but it is based on fact. For her now-feted heroism, the real Maya won the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, an honour about which she was happy to boast to all her CIA colleagues in a mass email. ¹

I watched *Zero Dark Thirty* in a nearly full cinema in Indiana. Jessica Chastain's Maya may have been 'fine' in torture bunkers, but I definitely was not. Beyond the movie theatre, the shopping mall was all aglow with holiday decorations; and around me, my fellow moviegoers seemed snug in the cosy darkness of the auditorium, and smug in this elevation of white women as the ultimate weapon in crushing Brown terrorists. The audience actually cheered several times during the screening: once during a scene that showed a Brown man being waterboarded; another time as Maya inched closer to catching the man that the Americans had been hunting for a long decade; and of course at the end, as she was hailed as the heroine who crushed the most evil man in the world.

Meanwhile I cringed, not just because Maya's search for parity with men uncritically emulates some deeply unappealing behaviours which it seems utterly bizarre for anyone to aspire to (from puerile trash-talking to torture), or even because she dismisses the whole of Pakistan as 'kinda fucked up' within the first few minutes of the film, but because it seemed like I was only person who saw in *Zero Dark Thirty* an utter perversion of the general project of gender equality.

I cried at the end when the audience stood up to hand the movie a standing ovation. A few months later, the movie was further celebrated at the Oscars, where Jessica Chastain was nominated for Best Actress. Both the real and the fictive white women had prevailed, becoming equal to white men in their capacity to subjugate Brown men.

In *Zero Dark Thirty* (and the true story behind it), American feminism – once a movement that existed in opposition to the state, as a critique of its institutions and mores – is recast as an aide that serves the state's interests by any means imaginable. This identification with those interests, as well as the desire to go out and conquer the world with the same mindset of oppression and domination modelled by white men, seems to have become a warped feminist goal. Put another way, white women have wanted parity

with white men at any cost, including by avidly taking on the domination of people of colour. As white feminists have progressed within their societies and begun to occupy increasingly important positions, they are constructing a feminism that uses the lives of non-white people as arenas in which they can prove their credentials to white men.

In her 2019 book *A Woman's Place: US Counterterrorism Since 9/11*, Joana Cook writes that feminism, particularly in relation to the state, used to be focused on promoting peace and *non-violence*. Being a feminist entailed a sense of sisterhood with *all* women, discouraging actions where one woman hurt the lives and livelihoods of other women. The state was understood as propagating and institutionalizing patriarchal norms, and resisting those (rather than adopting them) was considered a feminist act. But in America's War on Terror, the state subsumed the struggle for equality, and gave white women seeming parity with white men by offering them the opportunity to crush Brown, Muslim men – who had become the ultimate antagonists in the white imagination. Crucially, these white women were allowed to take on the 'unfeminine' characteristics of violence and warfare, something that would typically threaten the dominant patriarchy they existed under, only when they exercised this power on someone even lower than them in the white supremacist hierarchy: Brown foreigners. ²

Clearly visible in this trade-off is the kind of conditional, limited power which wealthy, nineteenth-century British women experienced when they ventured overseas to British colonies. In both cases, freedom is a zero-sum game, where more for one group (white women) is only possible if there is less for another (non-white people). It is not just the notion of women venerating violence which is shocking and anti-feminist, but the racial dimension that is central to the assumption of greater power by white women.

If white American feminists of the 1960s and the Vietnam era advocated for an end to war, the new white feminists of the newborn twenty-first century were all about fighting the war alongside the boys. Warfare, traditionally one of the most starkly gendered activities in human society, was opening its arms to women in even its most gruesome and violent moments, and this was somehow seen as a great step forward for everyone. The War on Terror, at least in theory, was America's first 'feminist' war.

It wasn't just CIA analysts that were glorified; it was also female soldiers. The story of Private Jessica Lynch is a particularly well-known example. On 23 March 2003, Lynch – a nineteen-year-old supply clerk with a maintenance unit of the US Army – was caught in an ambush and captured by Iraqi forces. Eleven other soldiers were killed and Lynch was taken to a hospital where, according to the Pentagon, she was mistreated by the Iraqis. US special operations forces launched a secret mission to rescue Lynch; it was alleged that the first words she said when she was found were, 'I am an American soldier too.'³

The rescue was recorded and a five-minute video was released to the media by the Pentagon. Within hours she became a media darling, her courage feted on the cover of *Newsweek* against the backdrop of a giant American flag, and she was described as a 'female Rambo' and an 'American hero'. But a couple of months later, the heroics of Lynch began to be questioned. The BBC aired a scathing documentary that accused the US government of exaggerating both the heroics of her rescue and her mistreatment by the Iraqis, to bolster public support for the war.⁴ Many of these allegations were later proven to be true, but the Pentagon's propaganda had already taken effect. Then, in November 2003, NBC aired a television film called *Saving Jessica Lynch*, which touted the same heroic version of the story that had been challenged by the BBC and others months before. The female American soldier as a heroine in the Iraq War was the image America would remember.

I refer to the War on Terror as 'feminist' because the propagation of women's rights was positioned front and centre as a purported goal of the military intervention. American women were liberated, and now they, along with male service members, would go to Afghanistan to root out the misogynist regime of the Taliban. America thus was not a cruel superpower bombing a much smaller nation, but a force for good, helping to bring gender equality to a war-torn country. The effort to eradicate terror (read *Islamic* terror, not white nationalist terror, despite the latter's considerably larger tally of dead Americans, 168 of whom perished in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995) was a project that involved providing schools and health clinics and even beauty parlours, assisting in legal reform and the development of domestic violence shelters, and drafting progressive

constitutions. The small matter of devastating bombings which left thousands dead and more disabled, forever splintering families and wrecking livelihoods, was a necessary means to that shining feminist end. When a female American soldier did something unimaginably violent or cruel, it was simply part of the larger noble project of helping Afghanistan or Iraq become countries that valued women just as America did.

In the spirit of this women's liberation portion of the War on Terror, efforts were made by the US government to create Yemeni and Iraqi and Afghan 'Mayas' – women trained in warfare drawn from behind enemy lines and reconstituted as anti-terror warriors, an unusual strategy in the Middle East and South Asia if not an unprecedented one. Millions of dollars were spent on counterterrorism training for women, including at least one elite all-female Yemeni counterterrorism unit and two programmes called the Daughters of Iraq and the Sisters of Fallujah (designed to provide incriminating information about the Sons of Iraq and the Brothers of Fallujah, respectively). ⁵ These programmes were based on the premise that Brown women could be weaponized against the Brown men who were their family and friends – that their intrinsic identification with and loyalty to a Western definition of freedom and feminism would supersede their bonds to their communities. But the irony that some Americans could be bombing one village in the morning while other Americans inaugurated a school in another in the afternoon did not pass unnoticed by Afghan women, on whom white American feminists attempt to inscribe their own interests and aspirations.

The point here is not so much that such programmes were a failure, but rather the smug white feminist assumption that Afghan women were so disconnected from their fathers, brothers and husbands (all cruel and barbaric in the American imagination) that they would be happy to serve as spies and intelligence-gatherers for the Americans. It is this failure, or refusal, to recognize that Afghan women were inextricably connected to Afghan men, and that bombing the men directly affected the women, that explains the failure of many programmes initiated in the region, and illustrates the arrogance and self-involvement of white feminism more generally.

The entanglement of the feminist agenda with America's endless and ever-expanding War on Terror gave birth to 'securifeminism', a term coined by the Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod to describe the collusion between international women's rights advocates and the global security enterprise. The national shock and grief around the 9/11 attacks located the subsequent foreign war in a very different category to any that America had fought before. The threat was not abstract or hypothetical, and it was not happening somewhere far away. It felt tangible, immediate, personal.

In his book *Bland Fanatics*, the novelist and essayist Pankaj Mishra recounts just how readily the War on Terror and all of its incipient brutalities were accepted even by the Western intellectual class, which had traditionally been critical of America's military adventures in the developing world.⁶ The particular neo-imperialist flavour of the moment was captured in a bit of triumphal reporting by the *Atlantic's* Robert Kaplan, who gleefully wrote that 'Welcome to Injun Country' was the refrain among American soldiers all over the world, who imagined that their mission was to play cowboy, and kill and dominate darker-skinned enemies by any possible means.

But the task of saving Afghan women could put a shinier gloss on the job. As Abu-Lughod points out in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Americans promoted a 'liberation lie' that positioned them as the saviours of downtrodden women in every country that they bombed.⁷ From this superior perch, liberal white feminists imagined gender-based violence as something found only in faraway lands. Among public commentators and journalists, the liberation lie facilitated blindness about both US foreign policy and the real problems women face in the developing world.

In 2002, a coalition of Western women's organizations sent an open letter to President George W. Bush asking him to 'to take emergency action to save the lives and secure the future of Afghan women' – an effort that revealed just how in step they were with the premise of feminism exported via military interventions. The signatories of the letter included Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation in Virginia, together with other notable feminists such as Gloria Steinem, Eve Ensler, Meryl

Streep and Susan Sarandon. American women overwhelmingly support the war, they noted, because it will 'liberate Afghan women from abuse and oppression'. ⁸ The National Organization for Women also put out statements in support of the war and its allegedly feminist objectives. And across the mainstream American and British establishment, liberals including white feminist heroines like eventual Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright signed up wholeheartedly to the cause. Amid this media-friendly messaging of downtrodden Afghan women crying out to be rescued, the disconnect between the practice of American brutality and the preaching of American saviourdom largely escaped notice.

In June 2004, then President Bush announced that the invasion of Afghanistan had reached victory: 'Three years ago, the smallest displays of joy were outlawed. Women were beaten for wearing brightly colored shoes ... Today, we witness the rebirth of a vibrant Afghan culture.' ⁹ More recently, a *New York Times* headline tried to celebrate that same victory, affirming its reality, even while noting that women themselves had a different experience: 'Shelters Have Saved Countless Afghan Women. So Why Are They Afraid?' ¹⁰ The article did not note that the 'countless' women accommodated in shelters represented a mere fraction of the 32,000 civilians that Americans and Western forces had killed during the occupation. ¹¹

When Iraq became the second venue for the great American experiment in democracy promotion, it was of course necessary to enact the same enforced feminist salvation there too. As Bush put it, Iraqi women had to have rights because 'the security of our own citizens depends on it'. The continuing American push towards 'the advance of freedom' in the Greater Middle East, Bush claimed, ¹² gave 'new rights and new hopes to women there' who would 'play an essential part in rebuilding the nation'. ¹³

Thus a new flavour of white feminism was born. Bolstered by the history of white supremacy within feminism, it resurrected nationalistic themes and made the international propagation of feminist values, such as gender equality, a necessary component of Western feminism itself.

Securofeminists, as I see them, were not simply invested in fighting the War on Terror; they were also committed to using white military power to

promote white values all over the world. Just as imperial feminists during the British colonial era had convinced themselves of their own benevolence in improving the lives of native women, so too did securofeminists believe that they were ‘saving’ Afghans and Iraqis from themselves.

The birth of securofeminism was not an accident or a coincidence. The Bush administration’s discourse around the global War on Terror propagated the notion that belief in women’s dignity and women’s equality made it essential to support the conflict as well. It also suggested that the achievement of this dignity and equality would lead to a triumph in that war, since ‘men and women with hope and purpose and dignity do not strap bombs on their bodies and kill the innocent’. ¹⁴ Yet the history of racial privilege that made white women so comfortable in claiming moral authority over Brown men, and the vast global disparities in wealth and power which drove Brown people to strap bombs on their bodies as a means to have their voices heard, went largely unexamined.

Since Americans respected women’s right to equality, the imposition of American values must surely be the only way to get people in these lesser states to learn to respect women’s rights. There was, in the grammar of the War on Terror, only one way to get to gender parity, and it involved the establishment of American-style liberal democratic institutions. Securofeminism thus bound white American feminism to the neo-imperial and neo-liberal project of nation-building around the world – one that Harvard professor and historian Niall Ferguson articulated in *Colossus*, his book on American empire ¹⁵ – and the idea that it was imperative that young Americans should be taught to go overseas and transform other nations in their own image much as Britain has done. Caught in its fevers, American feminists did not question loudly enough the wisdom of exporting feminism through bombs and drones. Trickle-down feminism, everyone assumed, would miraculously fast-forward the realization of a gender-equal, free-market world created in the self-image of America.

In 2012, the influence of securofeminism was clearly visible in the contents of the first US Department of State’s Women and Counterterrorism Strategy as well as the US State Department Counterterrorism Unit’s Plan on Women, Peace and Security. In the words of one of its architects, Jane Mosbacher Morris: ‘[We] really started to solidify what the different ways

are that you can engage women on the issue of terrorism and counterterrorism; and what we as a department should be doing consistently to engage women.’ The new plan wanted women in countries involved in the still-running War on Terror to take part in ‘counter-messaging and other examples of the fight against terror’. ¹⁶

A 2016 report by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) declared that ‘women’s rights and place in society are central to the narratives of violent extremist groups, and these narratives are the terrain on which women in Afghanistan fight to establish their rights’, and argued that since terror groups wanted to limit women’s rights, women should be enlisted in fighting them. Notably, this meant only that ‘countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extreme (PVE) programming needs to include women as target groups’. ¹⁷ There was no mention of investing in Afghan women’s political participation or empowering them to act in and for their own communities, perhaps because if Afghan women had political freedom they would prioritize ending the American occupation before anything else. Instead, the goal was to train Afghan women to be puppets of their American CVE or PVE instructors.

In the paradigm set out by this strategy, if Afghan women were unwilling to accept the American assumption that most of their young men were terrorists, and to collaborate with American forces in interrogating, imprisoning or killing them, then it must be assumed that they were also against women’s empowerment. Supporting America’s foreign policy interests had thus become synonymous with feminism.

One particularly distressing example of the high cost to feminist progress exacted by the War on Terror is what happened in Pakistan after the capture of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in 2011. In the run-up to his capture, the CIA and the US military allegedly worked with the charity Save the Children in hiring Dr Shakil Afridi, a Pakistani physician, to run a fake Hepatitis B vaccination programme as a front for their surveillance operations. ¹⁸ Per CIA instructions, Dr Afridi and a group of female healthcare workers visited the bin Laden compound under the guise of administering vaccinations, and managed to gain access, although they did not see bin Laden or manage to vaccinate anyone. In 2012, all foreign Save the Children staff were expelled from Pakistan, and in 2015 the entire

organization was required to shut its doors there – despite having denied (as it continues to deny) that it was involved in the effort.

The CIA managed to get their guy, but when the Pakistanis, irate not to have been told about the raid, banished US military trainers from nearby Islamabad as a penalty for the unsanctioned manoeuvre, they were immediately threatened with the suspension of the \$800 million aid package that the US had promised Pakistan. This exposes yet again the coercive power that aid wields. The loss of aid money was not, however, the worst impact of the tragedy. As the British medical journal the *Lancet* reported, the unintended victims of the tragedy were the millions of Pakistani children whose parents now refused to have them vaccinated (amidst rising rates of polio). ¹⁹ In their view, if the CIA could hire a doctor to run a fake vaccine programme, then the whole premise of vaccinations became untrustworthy. Within a few years of the raid, Pakistan had 60 per cent of all the world's confirmed polio cases. ²⁰

Then there was the targeting of Pakistan's Lady Health Worker Programme. Implemented in 1994, this ongoing programme trains Pakistani women in basic healthcare provision. ²¹ In a country that is struggling to give its women a voice, the programme represents a bold woman-centred step forward that has actually increased the availability of healthcare for millions of Pakistani women who would otherwise have none. The health workers go from house to house, covering both remote rural areas and overpopulated urban ones (constituencies in desperate need of better healthcare provision), disbursing basic preventive and clinical care, including prenatal and postnatal support and, of course, vaccinations.

When vaccinations became suspect, so too did these health workers. Their vans and convoys were attacked by terrorist groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which was running its own anti-vaccination intimidation campaign. On 26 November 2014, four vaccinators were gunned down in Balochistan, Pakistan. Earlier that same year, a health worker named Salma Farooqi was kidnapped, tortured and murdered in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. ²² The killings have continued, the latest occurring in April 2019, when a group of vaccinators was shot at and one killed, finally leading to the suspension of Pakistan's polio vaccination drive. ²³

This example illustrates how white feminists' uncritical acceptance of the goals and strategies of the War on Terror failed woefully to account for the harm to feminist initiatives like the Lady Health Workers Programme. Once again, Brown women and Brown children were left facing the costs and consequences of the political actions of white women and their governments. The Save the Children episode was cleverly omitted from *Zero Dark Thirty* and most other accounts of the raid, conveniently side-stepping any discourse on the decision to endanger healthcare provision to millions of Brown women and children. The question that it poses is whether it is the lady health workers of Pakistan, meeting their community's needs despite the threat to their own lives, or the torture-happy women of the CIA who are the real feminist heroines of the bin Laden story.

It is not just the United States that is guilty of doublespeak on feminism. In 2014, Sweden, led by their newly installed centre-left foreign minister Margot Wallström, announced that it was going to have a 'feminist' foreign policy. The text of the new policy read: Equality between women and men is a fundamental aim of Swedish foreign policy. Ensuring that women and girls can enjoy their fundamental human rights is both an obligation within the framework of our international commitments, and a prerequisite for reaching Sweden's broader foreign policy goals on peace, and security and sustainable development. [24](#)

The year after the policy was launched, Wallström addressed a parliamentary committee, saying that given the country's new feminist foreign policy, the Swedes would not export arms to countries that did not meet its democracy criterion. The main country at issue was Saudi Arabia, whose use of arms and intimidation to harass Saudi women's rights activists was well known. However, in 2017 a civil society group discovered that Sweden's arms-export relationship with Saudi Arabia had never ceased. In September 2019, after a bombing by Saudi aircraft that killed around one hundred people in Yemen, Margot Wallström said that she would 'speak with as many people as possible'. Listening, however, is unlikely to help a situation in which, according to a Swedish television report, Saudi Arabia continues to use Swedish arms to bomb Yemenis, displacing hundreds of

thousands and killing at least ten thousand. Despite its ‘feminist’ foreign policy, Sweden remains the fifteenth-largest arms exporter in the world. ²⁵

Canada also deserves special mention for a similar insistence in casting its interventions and policies as ‘feminism’. In 2017, Canadian foreign minister Chrystia Freeland announced that the country was spearheading a ‘feminist international assistance policy’ that had been developed after consultations with 15,000 people in sixty countries. Under the umbrella of the new policy, Canada would be spending billions of Canadian dollars towards ‘advancing gender equality’ and ‘empowering women and girls’. The percentage of the total international assistance budget devoted to gender-related development projects was to be increased from 1–2 per cent to about 90 per cent. ²⁶

And yet Canada’s international assistance budget had already been committed by the government of the previous prime minister, Stephen Harper, until 2020, leaving no funds to realize the development minister’s claims. ²⁷ Additionally, experts such as scholar Jessica Cadesky noted that the policy conflated ‘gender equality’ with ‘women’s empowerment’, depoliticizing or overpoliticizing gender to fit the government’s policy proposals. ²⁸ In parallel, the government refused to heed demands from the Canadian Labour Congress and other rights groups like Amnesty International Canada to implement measures that would allow them to report and track arms sales to foreign countries including the United States. ²⁹ In June 2020, a report showed that Canada had doubled its arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 2019, despite having criticized the country for its abysmal human rights record and having placed a moratorium on further arms exports in 2018. ³⁰ A September 2020 report by the United Nations declared that Canada was ‘fuelling war’ in Yemen; the United States, United Kingdom and France were also mentioned in the report as enablers.

So even while it has not spent or allocated new funds towards realizing the feminist foreign assistance policy and is continuing to sell arms to countries such as the United States and Saudi Arabia, Canada is enjoying the inherent virtue signalling that comes from adopting something ‘feminist’. ³¹ This scenario reveals how the political branding of feminism is directed largely towards white feminists, who want to feel good about their country’s moral generosity on the global stage while glossing over all

the many acts of oppression and violence against non-white populations in which that country is complicit.

It is not only CIA agents, development bureaucrats and nation states that have co-opted the language of feminism; journalists are at it, too. If the former create and manage the conditions of war, this latter group shapes its narrative. The image of the War on Terror as a feminist war to deliver rights to women around the world could not have been established without State Department spokeswomen, female CIA operatives, and other women directly associated with the war project. But civilian journalists – *female* journalists in particular – also played a central role in embedding that narrative of a pro-feminist, white Western coalition fighting on behalf of anti-feminist, primitive, patriarchal and pre-modern countries that were too apathetic or too weak or too traitorous to fight terror in their homelands themselves.

In a 2015 article from the *New York Times*, journalist Alissa Rubin calls women's shelters 'one of the most successful – and provocative – legacies of the Western presence in Afghanistan'. ³² It is an alarming claim, given that by the time the article was written, the most provocative legacy might have been the 11,000 Afghans killed or injured in the war just that year, a record high adding to the total of hundreds of thousands of casualties. ³³ The very idea of helping women or establishing shelters, Rubin tells her readers, was 'a revolutionary idea in Afghanistan – every bit as alien as Western democracy and far more transgressive'. True, government-run shelters did not exist as a recourse for Afghan women before the arrival of the Americans, but it is also true that violence against women in general was increased by the American presence, as more villages were bombed, male breadwinners died and women were left vulnerable to exploitation. Shelters were undeniably an asset, but whether they were worth an occupied and bombed-out country is an open question. And the need for such shelters was significantly lower before existing structures of social support were decimated by war. As ever, it is galling to see white people patting themselves on the back for providing paltry 'solutions' to problems which they themselves inflicted or enflamed.

Many heroines of American journalism writing in publications like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* or reporting for major television networks have played a role in legitimizing America's neo-imperial project in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Middle East at large, promoting a narrative that violent military incursions are designed to liberate women and deliver better societies. Thus they also underscore their own superior status as white feminists, with their values of rebellion over resilience, risk over caution and speed over endurance as the ultimate feminist qualities. Afghan women emerge as no more than prototypes whose wishes align with what white feminists think they should want, rather than people with independent political positions and perspectives.

Some of the tactics deployed by white women in particular in reporting on the Middle East and on Muslim women are a savage allegory of the self-serving nature of white feminism. Many offer a 'friendship', or rather the construction of a framework of 'sisterhood', to gain access to the lives of the women they wish to report on, even when they cannot possibly fully understand those women because they do not speak their language. Åsne Seierstad, for example, author of the bestselling *The Bookseller of Kabul*, freely admits that she capitalized on the Afghan cultural formality of offering hospitality and moved into a family's house just to get material for her book. She remarks that she 'never mastered Dari', ³⁴ and yet she felt completely entitled to represent the innermost thoughts of the women of the family, who spoke only that language.

The resulting stories, for which the writers are paid, betray their subjects' confidence or at best appear startlingly insensitive to their subjects' feelings. Worse, having no enduring relationship to the community, these white writers disappear from the lives of their subjects the second the stories are filed, with no regard for the emotional, political and practical consequences of their exposures and betrayals. Such consequences are exemplified by a lawsuit that the bookseller's second wife brought against Seierstad, for defamation and negligent journalistic practices. Among other things, the suit alleged that Seierstad's disclosure of certain sexual behaviours had forced some of the women to emigrate to avoid the censure or worse that they would have suffered as a result of those disclosures had they remained in Afghanistan. Ultimately, a Norwegian appeals court

reversed a lower-court judgment against Seierstad, but the case dragged on for more than a decade.

The intimate female-only spaces in Middle Eastern and Afghan households have proven maddening ciphers for Western journalists seeking to decode the mysterious lives of Muslim terrorists and their women. A consequence of this gender separation is that male journalists reporting from Muslim countries often have access to only half the world, and hence half the story. Some, like the photographer who accompanied *New York Times* journalist Rod Nordland in Afghanistan, have pretended not to understand that men are not permitted to enter these spaces, barging into women's quarters to take pictures – in this case, of a young woman, the subject of a story Nordland was writing on honour killings, who had retreated to the women's quarters of the house expressly to avoid his invasive attentions. ³⁵

This separation of female space has in turn created opportunities for Western female journalists looking for ways to succeed in the often sexist, male-dominated field of war correspondence. Like the white feminists who want to establish their equality in inflicting torture on Brown men, white women journalists have been eager to prove their equal prowess in war journalism by reporting on the inner lives and sad situations of Muslim women. Their priority is not feminist solidarity, but gender parity with white men in professional advancement.

Some white female journalists have pointed to this in their public statements: famed anchor Katie Couric saw the Gulf War as 'a proving ground that made the female journalist a "ten",' ³⁶ and the steady supply of wars since have produced many more tens. Christiane Amanpour of CNN, Lara Logan of CBS, award-winning photojournalist Lynsey Addario, as well as many lesser-known reporters, have descended into the women's spaces of Iraq and Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Somalia. A trove of journalistic exposition, much of it highlighting the secret, underground, hidden nature of these spaces, has followed, captured in photographs, front-page stories and bestselling books that have burnished the profiles and shored up the finances of these white feminist heroines.

In 2015, for example, Lynsey Addario's memoir, *It's What I Do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War*, became a widely feted bestseller and

was swiftly optioned for film. In it, Addario describes how she chose her job with the *New York Times* to prove herself as a woman in the male-dominated realm of war photography. The success of her series on women in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, 'Jihad's Women', led to a MacArthur Foundation 'Genius Grant' in 2009. Addario has come to specialize in intimate images of foreign, largely Black and Brown women, published in top Western magazines. One particular contribution, featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2016, shows a nearly naked Sudanese teenager, pregnant with her rapist's child – an image that no magazine would feature of an American girl.

In discussions of her recent photo book *Of Love & War*, Addario's own bravery at going out into a war zone is front and centre, while the heroism of the civilians actually *enduring* a war imposed by the United States and its allies never comes up. Addario describes how her access to women's spaces and even her own experience of motherhood helped her reporting, but never acknowledges or questions the opportunism of how she has deployed this 'sisterhood'. Neither does she talk about how whiteness and Americanness play crucial roles in her work – both invisible business cards conferring an aura of authority and legitimacy on the holder, and which non-white and non-Western women cannot fall back on as a means to open doors wherever they go. And of course no mention is made of the power she holds over the Afghan women in choosing which parts of their lives she makes visible to the white and Western world. [37](#)

For many white feminist writers, going 'behind the veil' of their benighted sisters has been a reliable path to success. Former *Chicago Tribune* journalist Kim Barker's memoir, *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, was turned into a movie featuring comedienne Tina Fey. Katherine Zoepf, who reported from Egypt and Syria for the *New York Times*, released her own book, *Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World*. In 2019, Dionne Searcey, the *New York Times*' West Africa bureau chief, published *In Search of Disobedient Women: A Memoir of Love, Rebellion, and Family, Far Away*, the book's very title alluding to the fact that disobedient West African women (i.e. women who behave as white feminists think they should) are very hard to find. This list goes on.

It is a convenient synthesis: the gendered divisions of the Muslim world with the individualistic feminist goals of the West, in a time of constant war. Through the tempering medium of a white woman who functions as a moral legitimization chamber, issues of torture and subjugation are transformed into little celebrations of white women's bravery rather than exposures of white cruelty. White citizens looking at Addario's photos or Searcey's reports on Boko Haram will not consider the real impact of the War on Terror or of their own nation's role in it, simply the 'courage' of white women who, like Gertrude Bell a hundred years earlier, have gone riding into the field, realizing their potential as men's equals through the enduring benefits of white privilege and imperial dominance.

There is an assumption in this kind of reporting that bringing the stories to light is somehow beneficial for the subjects themselves. In one interview, Lynsey Addario said that her photography was an attempt to reveal to readers 'who these women really were – if they could see them in their homes, with their children ... it might offer a more complete picture'. ³⁸ But, in the same way that the purported goal of feminist rescue legitimizes the violence of war, so the claim to be helping their subjects gives white feminist journalists moral carte blanche to use lies and subterfuge freely. When Addario wants to photograph a secret girls' school under the Taliban, she uses a camera concealed in her bag. ³⁹ If an Afghan man (Addario seems to organize her reporting primarily through them) objects to someone photographing 'his' women, his protestations can be discarded because of their repugnant chauvinism by our highly principled feminist reporter, who unfortunately forgets to tell us how or whether she obtained consent from the women themselves.

Addario may have been more careful about getting consent (despite not knowing the language) in other cases, but in this incident, it is unclear at best if she did so and, if she did, how she went about doing it. Whether or not she did so, her failure to address this in her book suggests that it was not consent but the photos that were important. (Notably, it is not only white women who have been accused of this mistake. Steve McCurry, the photographer who took *National Geographic's* iconic 1985 photograph of the Afghan girl, has recently been accused of failing to get the girl's consent, a charge he denies. ⁴⁰) When subterfuge is not necessary or not

possible, white feminist reporting relies instead on the sort of camaraderie that can elicit details. Katherine Zoepf's prologue in *Excellent Daughters* finds her ensconced with a group of female Saudi teenagers, one of whom is about to get married. The girls are sharing confidences with each other and with Zoepf, who has deliberately befriended them for this purpose. The bride hopes for a Disney-themed wedding and giggles every time the subject of her fiancé comes up. Zoepf calls on her upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness as a qualification for the task of revealing the secrets of these young Saudi women to her Western readers. Through Zoepf's words, one feels invited into the fold, escorted into that intimate world where Muslim women share their hopes, fears and problems, away from the gaze of men – and usually also the Western reader. And through her eyes we are encouraged to condemn the puerility of girls more at ease discussing Disney than their future husbands, or see an irredeemable backwardness in those who feel ambivalent about talking to their fiancé before the wedding. Of course, she makes her condescending judgements available only to her readers, not to her Saudi 'friends'.

In other journalistic forays, Zoepf focuses on a secret society in Syria, then turns her attention to boy-crazy husband-hunters in liberal Lebanon, relying on the Sex and the Orient mix (the chapter is titled 'The Most Promiscuous Virgins in the World') that reliably entertains Western readers. Despite knowing this, Zoepf expresses surprise that some of her subjects ask her why she's more interested in these sorts of salacious stories than in 'serious Lebanese girls' – the ones fighting for better education, harassment-free workplaces and more equal relationships. To everyone else, the reason should be clear: Zoepf isn't trying to elevate and explicate the struggles of other women – or to challenge American ideas about Muslim women – in the service of constructing mutual feminist understanding. She has simply created white feminist clickbait.

The lack of accountability in depicting her subjects comes to a head when Zoepf discusses the reaction some of her subjects have had to her stories. In Syria, she interviews Enas, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a woman who runs an all-female madrassa. Following the publication of a story about Islamic women's movements in the *New York Times* – which 'included comments by Enas and her best friend, Fatima, as well as a large photo of Enas kneeling on a carpet at the girls' madrassa where she taught'

– Zoepf receives a distressed phone call from her teen subject, whose exposure in the newspaper could mean a ‘frightening visit to the madrassa from the *mukhabarat*, the infamous secret police’ and subsequent surveillance and harassment. ⁴¹ There is no helping going on here, with the lives of women like Enas laid on the line for the careers of women like Zoepf.

This is the predictable outcome when intimate access becomes the story and building meaningful sisterhood is entangled with personal ambition. Apart from anything else, it is essential to remember that the purported intimacy which these journalists claim should not be mistaken for expertise. Addario can speak neither Dari nor Pashto and by her own admission knows little about Afghanistan beyond the *New York Times* articles she has read while working out on the elliptical at the gym. ⁴² Zoepf has studied Arabic but the extent of her proficiency is unknown.

The duelling motives at work in the uneasy journalist-as-feminist paradigm mirror the tension of collective-versus-individual that is threaded through the history of women’s empowerment. The feminism of sisterhood alleges a universal female affinity bound by the fight against patriarchy; and it is by appealing to this idea that Western female journalists gain access to the intimate spaces of Brown and Black women. It is easy to tell Afghan or Nigerian women how you too are a mother, you too have felt frightened walking down the street alone at night, and in doing so you manufacture the emotional bonds that forge trust. Ultimately, however, it is too often the feminism of a ruthless individualism that motivates white women journalists to reach out like this in the first place.

Whether it’s female operatives hunting Osama bin Laden from within the ranks of the CIA, or the ‘soft’ warfare of overseas reporters who display a patronizing and white-centric bias, white feminists have long been front and centre in the War on Terror. Carrying forward the racial hierarchies and self-interested exploitation of the colonial era, white feminists have identified progress not as renouncing war and empire, but as competing with white men to run the great engine of neo-imperialism.

If the colonial feminists of old exoticized Muslim women to underscore their own ‘civilized’ and ‘superior’ ways, these neo-colonial white feminists do so to illustrate their own courage and compassion – often while

providing a moral subsidy for cruelties inflicted in feminism's name. Times may have changed, but the commitment of whiteness to extracting value wherever it can – and dominating the narrative to frame this extraction as benevolence – persists.



5

Sexual Liberation is Women's Empowerment

I first learned about sex-positive feminism in a graduate seminar on feminist theory at a large Midwestern university. Every Tuesday and Thursday, the long, bare classroom in the basement of one of the campus's careworn liberal arts buildings would fill with students eager to talk about their hook-ups, their predilection for one or another kind of erotica, and their general affirmation of the transformative capacities of the sexual act. (For those who weren't there, sex-positive feminism is the precept that women are not free until and unless they are sexually free.) In the competitiveness that graduate seminars breed, my classmates rambled on about threesomes, triumphant and unceremonious dumpings of emotionally attached lovers (who has time for attachment?) and, in general, lots and lots of sex. Every class unfolded as a sort of performance, where sexual identity was what defined each and any student. Nobody wanted to be 'unliberated', and so everyone shared, or rather overshared, compulsively.

Our smug white professor, nose-pierced and duly sporting the scarves and baubles of the well-travelled, encouraged it all as the mistress of ceremonies. The question of how and when sexual liberation had become not simply the centrepiece but the entire sum of liberation for a class on feminist theory never came up, and nor did any discussion of sexual identity and radical politics. The year was 2006.

I was disappointed, but I said nothing. I agreed with sexual liberation as an essential portion of liberation in general; I just wasn't convinced that it was the whole. I was in search of a politics that did more: that used a critique of the domination of cisgender identity over all gender identities to poke at the similarly oppressive hegemony of whiteness; that discussed who was automatically included under the umbrella of feminism and who was left out. By comparison, this seminar's obsession with sexual activity as the start and end of feminism seemed so limited and immature.

I wasn't older than my fellow students, but I was divorced and a single mother; I spent a lot of my time juggling precarious childcare arrangements and a constantly pulled and stretched budget; I didn't have much energy to chase the next sexual adventure. Around the same time that I took the seminar, I had just returned from Pakistan, still bruised at having to explain my life choices to a family that had never before seen a divorce. In Pakistan I had worried about somehow losing custody of my daughter, because children were seen as part of the father's family; back in America, I had to explain my fitness as a mother to the judicial courts, because I worked and went to school all day and, as an immigrant, did not have a local family support system. I had to make the case that being poor and an immigrant did not make me a bad mother.

The world I lived in beyond my classes at the university was not one most of my fellow students knew; it was a world of responsibility, precarity and survival. And I felt this difference from my classmates acutely. My brown skin and my longish tunics sent from Karachi were evidence enough in themselves, I felt; an indictment of the fact that I came from a less sexually liberated place and that I was much less adept at the performance of sexual liberation. Many of those who had known me growing up in Pakistan would have laughed if they heard how insecure I felt about that supposed sexlessness. I had been the rebel-in-chief of my class at our school. I was eager to do everything and anything that was not allowed – put on lipstick, call random boys on the phone, flirt with anyone who caught my eye, raise up my trousers to show an ankle, and generally break every rule I could. If there was something I was told I absolutely had to do, I just did not want to do it. In the United States, I was one of a handful of single mothers in my cohort, insistent on sticking it out to graduate despite

the admonishment of white course-load administrators who told me that ‘law school is no place for mothers, especially not single mothers’.

But in this graduate seminar, part of the PhD portion of the joint degree I was pursuing, I felt defensive for other reasons. Being Muslim and female was an identity that in the view of most liberal academics, and certainly students, went effortlessly with sexual repression. Few of my classmates had much idea of what life was like in other cultures. So often and in so many other classes I had heard both students and professors invoke the hapless women imprisoned by Islam (or as my professors and classmates would incorrectly describe them, ‘Islamic women’) as an offhand way to highlight the relative good fortune of the Western feminist. Western women were free to move on from questions of basic equality (assumed, incorrectly, to be long since resolved) to concerns of sexual pleasure.

To make clear I was not one of these oppressed and sexually subjugated women of the Muslim world, I had to *perform* my sexuality. And I have seen so many other Brown women do the same since: showing off their love of porn and lewd jokes; talking about what bawdy thing they’ve enjoyed with a husband or boyfriend; anything to underscore that they are sexually liberated and hence empowered.

It wasn’t about whether they genuinely enjoyed it – they may well have done, and good for them – but rather that they had to present it to others in order to be seen as equal to white women. I had no problem at all with people having rich, varied and fulfilling sex lives, or even talking about them. My problem was specifically with the expectation of talking about them as some kind of passport to feminist legitimacy.

Some, or even many, may not have had an agenda in mind, but others I spoke to did. There is now a term for this sort of pressure: compulsory sexuality. In her work, scholar Kristina Gupta defines this as evolving from ‘compulsory heterosexuality,’ ¹ the phenomenon which radical feminist Adrienne Rich defined as ‘a system of norms and practices that compel women to participate in the institution of heterosexuality’. Gupta and others identify both sexually repressive societies that deny women sexual liberation and choice, and supposedly sexually liberated societies like the United States that expect women to perform their sexual identity, as manifesting compulsory sexuality. In both cases, compulsory sexuality is a

means of disciplining others, or ‘a vector of regulation’. The idea of asexuality as an identity has evolved in part to underscore the pressure felt by those who do not wish to ascribe to a commodified sexualized identity.

‘Sexusociety’ is a similar concept, devised by gender scholar Ela Przybylo to describe a compulsorily sexual world. Since it is hard to consider what we are immersed in all the time, Przybylo uses the idea of asexuality – the polar opposite of compulsory sexuality – to explain her work. When we consider the world through an asexual lens, we can better apprehend how heterosexuality (and to a far lesser extent, LGBTQIA+ identities) has been co-opted as the basis for markets of goods that must be consumed. That is to say, consumption of particular products becomes the basis of being considered sexual or sexy.

Everybody knows that sex, particularly heteronormative sex, sells (of which more below), but Przybylo further argues that sex is being used to hide the extent to which capitalism has infiltrated our consideration of sexual identity as a whole, particularly for heteronormative identities. Asexuality, then, functions not simply as a sexual identity in itself, but also as a perspective to reveal the intersection of capitalism and sexual identity politics. We consume sexualizing products and therefore we are sexual; our sexual identity is thus predicated on capitalist consumption.

Back in graduate school in 2006, I did not have access to this sort of discussion or understanding to explain my sense of being cornered, forced to express myself in a certain way. I vehemently supported sexual liberation and sexual expression, but I did not understand why this had to be the most important or even the most visible thing about me. The burden of having to prove myself as non-sexually repressed – thereby earning the label ‘feminist’, worthy of respect and of being a voice in the room – sat wooden and unrelenting on my shoulders all semester long. And even if I had been able to explain how asexuality helps to underscore the lost anti-capitalist potential of its opposite – a heterosexuality immersed in consumerism – I would have been too afraid to bring it up. ‘Poor her,’ my colleagues might think. ‘All the repression of her culture has left her asexual.’ In this equation, where sexual empowerment equalled all empowerment, there was no room to consider the weight of compulsory sexuality.

No texts by Muslim feminists were assigned reading for the course – no Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* and no Amina Wadud’s *Qur’an*

and Woman, both texts that highlight how feminism within Islam confronts patriarchy. We spent no more than one hour of class discussion time on the subject of feminism in Muslim countries.

No class or seminar can cover everything, of course. But the lack of inclusion of any save the most Eurocentric perspectives is one of the conditions that prevents women from questioning the capitalist entanglements of sex-positive feminism, by failing to supply them with the differing critical perspectives and analytic tools to do so. The hegemony of a single perspective over other alternatives – because our professors didn't consider those alternative perspectives legitimate entries in the canon of feminist theory and literature – felt oppressive. The voices we encountered across that seminar's set texts were, in the overwhelming majority, white – a reading list that clearly indicated to me which voices mattered.

The exclusion of Muslim feminists in particular from the narrative of feminist thought has been the status quo in the West forever, occasionally broken by sudden and brief spurts of attention on 'other' feminists when news events focus on them, then swiftly re-established when the topical imperative passes. When Gloria Steinem's memoir, *My Life on the Road*, was published in 2015, Steinem named thirty-three women and three men in her list of 'best contemporary feminist writers'.² The list does include a few Muslim writers but only those who have toed the white feminist line, and not a single one who opposed the invasion of Afghanistan.³ I shouldn't have been too surprised – Steinem is an ex-employee of the CIA, and at the time was still serving on the boards of organizations for women soldiers and speaking at events where she was billed as one of the 'leading advocates for women in the military'.⁴ And the Muslim women who are palatable to the Western media and establishment are the ones who visibly refuse to critique the West, focusing only on what is wrong with Islam/Muslims/Muslim societies and thus validating the colonial thesis that all reform comes from the West.

Recent literature on countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives (which is how the anti-terror programmes have now been rebranded, in an effort to make them sound less punitive and coercive) supports this assumption of the inherent ills of Islam bringing orientalist mystery and even a sinister eroticism into the plot, with paranoid fantasies of Muslim

women cheerleading and sustaining the terror agendas of various groups.⁵ As the Brennan Center for Justice found in its analysis of CVE programmes within the Department of Homeland Security, these programmes masquerading as help for those at risk of radicalization are really fronts to gather intelligence, ruthlessly surveilling many who are clearly uninvolved in terrorism and pressuring others to become informants.⁶ This push to include Muslim women under the umbrella of automatic guilt which has operated in the West for two decades now, indicting all Muslim men as terrorists or potential terrorists, can be seen across the board, far beyond the more predictably right-wing propaganda of CVE specialists.

Perhaps especially among self-declared feminists, there is a curious substitution which takes place around Muslim women's sexuality and the monstrous figure of the Muslim terrorist, as I discovered when I wrote an article called 'Women and Islamic Militancy'.⁷ The central theme of the piece highlighted how some Muslim militant organizations use 'empowerment-like' rhetoric to attract women: I noted how the exclusion of Muslim women from the central narrative of Western feminism contributed to the power of this appeal. The article was considered so problematic by the editors that it was published with a 'response' from a 'real' feminist, who unsuccessfully tried to take down my arguments by listing the Islamic State's sins against women (as if I had missed them all); speculating about whether sixteen-year-old Islamic State recruits are mature enough to make political decisions; and providing a history of the conservative opposition to women's movements in general. Not long after publication, Michael Walzer, Professor of Political Philosophy at Princeton, gave an interview which accused me of being 'fascinated, even excited by the idea of a Muslim woman warrior' and terrorist killing.⁸

Here then was liberal Islamophobia: painting me as irrational, ruled by emotions and sinister obsessions, as opposed to the purely intellectual interest and critical questioning of my unimpeachably neutral white contemporaries. A single contribution which deviated from the white party line was enough to provoke my dismissal from the realm of rational discussion, too unbiddable even to be confronted directly – only derided in print and subject to insinuations. In my opinion, orientalism, racism and misogyny all played their part in Walzer's characterization: underpinning

his suggestion that I was titillated by terror, I think, was the notion that, being Muslim, I could not be trusted with rational analysis on these issues.

Sexual liberation and feminism were not always conflated. The sexual revolution of the 1960s onwards saw recognition and popularization of the idea that women, like men, had sexual needs and desires and should have the freedom to pursue them. The Women's Liberation Movement, initiated much earlier, had broader goals such as gender equality, equal access to job opportunities, freedom from violence and protection from harassment at the workplace and at home. The two then became conflated in the second half of the twentieth century, as both were gradually colonized by capitalism. The emergence of women as economic actors beyond the household, their wallets full of money they earned themselves, created a new category of consumer. That these women also wanted to be seen as sexy meant that advertisers could lure them in with images of the sexually liberated woman wearing a certain kind of lingerie, buying certain kinds of make-up and fashion items, smoking a certain kind of cigarette and drinking a certain kind of alcohol. A 1972 print ad for Bulova watches shows male and female arms with matching his and hers watches and the slogan 'Equal Pay, Equal Time'; ⁹ a Virginia Slims commercial showed a woman in tight pants bending down and the slogan 'They're slimmer than the fat cigarettes men smoke'. Meanwhile Newport cigarettes developed an entire campaign around the sexually liberated and economically empowered woman's search for gratification: 'Alive with pleasure!'

The energy and attention of the ordinary woman who a few years earlier might have marched for equal pay was now co-opted and pulled towards hanging out at newly built malls and acquiring the latest signifier of social progressivism. Sex is good marketing, and a sexy feminism could be directed towards the purchase of allegedly empowering products. This feminism was less concerned with the collective of all women or with feminist solidarity than it was with the individual, her quest for pleasure and her desire to get ahead. It was this process of corporate colonization that cut down the political possibilities of the feminist movement. Political transformation was out; increasing the individual woman's buying power, making her a better specimen of homo economicus, was in.

With the infamous decade of ‘free love’ having just drawn to a close, and the sexual revolution it kickstarted long underway, the central thesis of Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* – that the sexual act is imbued with the power differentials that operate in a patriarchal society – had particular relevance. To expose these power differentials, she critiqued the work of then ‘progressive’ writers like Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer. What passed for risqué and erotic, she asserted, was really just normalizing ways of demeaning, degrading and subjugating women. Sexual liberation could not be the sum total of women’s liberation, because sex could also be a venue for the perpetuation of patriarchy. Feminism could not leave this realm of sex unaddressed if it wanted to bring about equality and harness the real power of the sexual revolution.

Empowerment for women, Millett argued, required radical political action, with women’s energy targeting the dismantling of the structures of capitalism which were similarly dominated by men. For Millett, it was the unravelling of systems of power that would ultimately lead to equality for women. If the sexual revolution was recognizing women’s sexual needs, sexual politics was about exposing how women had been used as objects to satisfy male needs. If the sexual revolution wanted women to own their sexuality, Millett wanted the new feminist consciousness to provoke scrutiny of gender relations and inspire the subsequent development of a radical politics that would tear down misogynistic systems of power and control.

At the time, it appeared that this analysis and critical estimation of the power differentials within sex would be the next step in the Women’s Liberation Movement. When Millett’s book was published in 1970, it was a bestseller, and she was feted as a darling of the feminist movement. She was even featured on the cover of *Time*, her critical analysis of sex deemed prescient during a tumultuous time. But neither her renown nor the centrality of her thesis would endure. Perhaps critiquing the heterosexual sexual act as linked to oppression, and seeing feminism’s project as inherently tied to dismantling the excesses of capitalism, was asking for too much change too fast. Better to applaud women who embraced sex as enactors of sexual and feminist liberation, to call them empowered and encourage the idea that consumption of certain goods – Virginia Slims cigarettes or Maybelline lipstick – were an exercise of feminist power.

In the end, the sexy corporate feminism that connected liberation with conspicuous consumption won the day. By the 1990s, no one was reading *Sexual Politics* and no academic institution was willing to give Millett a permanent teaching position. In a sense, her fate represented the fate of radical politics as a once-upon-a-time cornerstone of feminist organizing and action.

The first epoch of white feminism – what is often described as the first wave ¹⁰ – was focused on the struggle for women's suffrage. The second wave, to which Millett belonged, saw the simultaneous emergence of radical anti-establishment politics and the opening up of a huge number of economic opportunities for women. In this sense, the second wave represented two competing and interconnected feminisms: that of the radical feminist committed to remaking social and political structures, and of the working girl who was eager to make the most of newly emerging opportunities. By the time the third wave came along in the 1990s, radical politics was nowhere to be found. As Gen Xers took the helm to continue the work begun by the second wave, it was evident which of the two strands – radical versus working girl – had won.

The woman who laid the foundation for a corporate-friendly working girl feminism was Helen Gurley Brown. Eight years before Kate Millett wrote *Sexual Politics*, Gurley Brown published her bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*. In that book, Gurley Brown, a scrappy transplant from Arkansas to New York City, told young women to become financially independent and have sexual relationships before they got married. Allegedly, the book was conceived when her then husband told her that she should consider writing a book detailing 'how a young single woman goes about having an affair'. *Sex and the Single Girl*, which sold millions of copies, was followed by *Sex and the Office*, in which she gave women a how-to on using their femininity and sexuality to gain power and rewards in the workplace.

Gurley Brown had a platform that allowed her to reach into the homes of middle-class American women, particularly those who were just beginning to join the workforce. As the editor of *Cosmopolitan* until 1996, she championed a wily feminism centred on a love of sexual adventure (within the bounds of heteronormativity) and the clever use of feminine sexuality to 'get ahead', as she herself had done. Gurley Brown was one of the first

women to present young American women with the idea that they could have it all – meaning love, sex and money. She poured these ideas into the magazine to create the archetype of the ‘Cosmo Girl’, which the *New York Times* described as ‘self-made, sexual and supremely ambitious’. The Cosmo Girl ‘looked great, wore fabulous clothes and had an unabashedly good time when the clothes came off’. [11](#)

This sort of feminism was marketable, and Helen Gurley Brown was a great champion of conspicuous consumption. Cosmo Girl feminism was not predicated on the protests and contestations of the radical feminists of the Women’s Movement. Advertisers rushed to fill the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, peddling clothes, perfumes, handbags and all the other things that women, now converted to economic producers and consumers, were supposed to buy, along with endless tips on pleasing men in bed. And if finding, dating and keeping a man were the main concerns of magazine’s editors, they encouraged readers to extend the same economic rubric to this quest as they did to all other aspects of their newly empowered feminist lives. The consistently transactional vocabulary around romantic relationships is an unmissable giveaway: as Moira Weigel so astutely points out in her book *Labor of Love*, women were exhorted to ‘shop around’.

Cosmo sex had no political or intellectual overtones; it was instead another product, something in which women could engage but that centred first on making themselves more attractive to men with the help of the magazine’s advertisers. The disingenuous emphasis on sexual freedom tamed a more radical version of feminism to fit capitalist society; instead of taking on the thorny business of how sex itself replicated patriarchy in complex ways, sex was made into a commodity which could be consumed by both men and women. And if sex was understood as a commodity that women were choosing to consume, then the morally problematic objectification of women could be replaced by the apparently morally neutral objectification of sex. Women *chose* to purchase make-up or high heels or bigger breasts, not to please men but to enhance their own self-esteem and their capacity to enjoy the liberation of sex. At the same time, the focus shifted away from oppressive institutions of the state and law, to the woman herself as a consumer. She carried the power of self-definition and self-determination in her wallet.

The problem was that the choices women had were largely constructed by market capitalism. Women, now seen as consumers, were repeatedly accosted with questions of whether they wanted this lipstick or that one, this handbag or that one. But even as these specific choices were being presented, the realm of *actual* choices available to women remained unchanged. And as they became more superficially powerful – as consumers and, at a much slower rate, as decision-makers in their professional spheres – they became less empowered in terms of the kind of collective political consciousness that would allow them to demand and create meaningful choices in the long run. Women could now choose among multiple brands of laundry detergent, but deferred or neglected opportunities to organize politically in order to demand free childcare for all women. Women wore power suits and carried power handbags to power lunches – power being seductively presented as a straightforward commodity for purchase.

Consumer capitalism beguiled women with options and the illusion of power and control. And the shopper is always an individual. She does not buy as part of a wider community and so she is taught to stop thinking of herself as part of a community, with shared strengths and shared objectives; she is conditioned to think of herself as a lone actor. She can choose to buy this car or that car, this house or that house, exercising economic power even while women's collective power slips invisibly away. Capitalism relies on the individual and therefore it valorizes the individual. And politics, with its agitation and collectivism, poses a threat to capitalism's colonization of all human activity for the purpose of profit – so capitalism demonizes any engagement with politics as undesirable, old-fashioned, 'radical' in the sense of antisocial and extremist. Little surprise then that with capitalism on her side (or rather pulling the strings from above), the cash-happy Cosmo Girl won the PR war against the women who had organized collectively, and emerged as the heir to the white feminist throne throughout the third wave.

The cult of the individual became the norm, along with its accompanying expression of power through consumer choice and accrual of capital. The window of discourse of feminism had shifted: instead of aspiring to develop a consensus and build solidarity based on what was good for all women, individual women were rewarded and even celebrated for looking out for

themselves. The self-made woman rose to take her place as companion to the self-made man in the Western mythos of success. But while consumer choices increased, large corporations rather than small businesses dominated the making and selling of the products that women used, concentrating the actual power generated by this profit among a small number of corporate executives in charge of enormous multinational companies. ¹² Even as the individual was muscled up as an agent of purchasing power, her power as an employee of those corporate bosses dwindled.

Meanwhile, female-targeted self-help books proliferated, encouraging women to conclude that any sense of dissatisfaction was their own individual problem – one that could be solved, like everything else, by buying something. One written by Gloria Steinem herself was titled *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*. In its pages, Steinem turns away from the politics of organizing women and defines the problem as an inner one of women's self-image.

Sex remained at the heart of this vision of a modern feminist, birthing an easy-going, pop feminism crystallized in the hit television show *Sex and the City*. In particular, Samantha's infamously voracious sexual appetite was lauded as a testament to the equality that the sexual revolution had 'won' for women. *Sex and the City* was so enduringly popular and considered such a landmark of feminist progress that it has subsequently become a frame through which white Western feminists measure the relative empowerment of other countries. As recently as 2016, twelve years after *Sex and the City* finished airing on TV, the *New York Times* reviewed *An African City*, a Ghanaian comedy drama in which five women look for love in Accra. The *Times* delighted in the fact that the show's characters 'fit perfectly into Carrie-or Miranda-type boxes ... [and] are as free and liberal about sex as their American HBO foremothers'. ¹³ Other similarities receive less attention: the article does not mention that the characters' lifestyles are more or less a work of fantasy; economically near-impossible for most viewers. But issues of class do not concern the creators of *Sex and the City* and its successors; so long as characters make sexually provocative statements, and model high levels of feminine consumption, who wants to

worry about the realities of women's lives? Delusional aspiration to the lives of upper-middle-class white women in one of the most financially unequal cities in the world, whose great achievement is acting out the myth that sexual freedom is the sum total of empowerment and liberation – a hollow feminism based on consumerism, with a bit of sexual liberation thrown in as distraction – that's an American product that can be exported internationally.

Beneath the popularity of *Sex and the City* lies the white feminist belief that they were the ones to discover the idea of women's sexual pleasure and its liberating potential. In this mythology, women everywhere throughout all time were sexually repressed until white women discovered female sexual pleasure in the twentieth century and set about teaching it to everyone else: exporting it to parts of the world which had barely heard the word 'sex' before white culture arrived to smash the taboo.

In 2019, the *New York Times* reviewed a Senegalese show called *Mistress of a Married Man*, which is typified by moments like the one in which protagonist Marème points to her own crotch and remarks, 'This is mine. I give it to whomever I please.' The white journalist contrasts the revolutionary, norm-challenging model of sexual liberation, presumably handed down by *Sex and the City* to make such a show now possible in Senegal, with 'a country where women's sexuality has often been hidden behind a curtain of discretion'. ¹⁴ Setting aside the sweeping generalization of this comment, the article also fails to acknowledge that Senegal, a former French colony, was far more sexually open and permissive than either the US or Europe before it was meddled with by white colonizers who actively imposed their repressive sexual mores on local populations. In fact, the nineteenth-century French administrators lamented the permissive morality and the 'corrupting influence of local populations'. ¹⁵

India, the country which gave us some of the world's most ancient sexual texts, gets no better treatment. 'There's plenty of casual sex,' enthuses the *New York Times* review of an Indian show, *Four More Shots Please!*, while once again predictably describing the series as India's own *Sex and the City*. But to maintain the implicit ranking of the Western 'mainstream' versus the limited 'progress' made by India, the journalist considers it necessary to mention that 'conservative viewers say there's too much sex'. ¹⁶

Sex and the City traffics in the myth that sexual liberation was discovered by pioneering white women who like high heels and date emotionally unavailable men. The assumption is that as a society evolves it becomes more sexually liberated; white Western societies, having evolved, are further along in the march of progress than non-Western ones. And yet the very sexual conservatism that is lamented as a sign of backwardness in non-white societies was in fact a gift of colonizing white Western powers. Just as white Westerners are now eager to 'liberate' women from sexual prudery and repression, a mere century and a half earlier they were eager to enforce sexual constraints on the cultures which they had colonized.

Before British colonization, it was normal for people in India to enjoy non-monogamous relationships. There were Hindu sects in which women had multiple partners, as well as Muslim men who married multiple women for life or even contracted temporary marriages for short-lived dalliances. All of these arrangements recognized the limitations of the monogamous marital relationship that was the only form of marriage known to and recognized by the colonizing Europeans. And beyond this broader, more flexible interpretation of matrimony, other kinds of sexual relationships took place between consenting adults: it was common for the richer merchants to take a mistress, and for widowed or unmarried women of means to take a younger lover. Homosexual relationships and transgender identities also existed in plain view, something that was extremely alarming to British colonists. Some trans women worked in the women's quarters of wealthy homes; others in the pleasure districts of Indian cities like Lucknow and Delhi, where the Mughal court had once provided reliable clients.

By contrast, in the same period in Britain, monogamous heterosexual relationships conducted within marriage were the only acceptable form of sexual contact. Unlike India, with its many religions, sects and modes of belief, Britain was a much more religiously homogenous nation, its governance closely connected to the Anglican Church. Heterosexual monogamy was part of the Christian moral code, as specific and subjective as any cultural norm (and not, as some white people unthinkingly assume, a natural moral code towards which all civilized societies gravitate). During their two-hundred-year period of control of India, the British were intent on

‘civilizing’ their domain by enforcing their own social and cultural norms – including those around sex. ¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, the British were not hugely sanguine about the differences in romantic and sexual practice they found in India, and they invested huge amounts of energy in speculating on the relative debauchery of the women they encountered there. In the view of one British magistrate, Alexander Abercrombie, Muslim women ‘were more sexually brazen than their Hindu counterparts, with insatiable sexual appetites and a dangerous promiscuity’. ¹⁸ And prostitutes existed ‘as a result of the insatiable sexual nature of Hindu women, who were unable to restrain themselves despite strict Hindu strictures because of their love of excitement’. ¹⁹

In the absence of any real evidence of the supposed dangers of these ‘unrestrained’ sociosexual practices, the white colonizers simply changed the rules to prove their own point. They set about creating a new class of crimes around these behaviours, with which they could then indict the local population. Under British rule, the Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 and the Cantonment Act of 1864 were passed to control and criminalize a vast array of Indian women’s sexual behaviours by creating spaces of race-based segregation. They required Indian prostitutes who served white British soldiers to live in quarters adjoining the military cantonments so that they were separated from the local population and had sex exclusively with white men – making it criminal for these women to live among their own families and work within their own community. They also created classifications of prostitution, the vagueness and breadth of which gave them power over the largest number of women possible. High-caste Hindu polygamy, Brahmin widowhood, orders of female religious mendicants, various forms of public performance and even Muslim marriage practices all now fell within the realm of ‘prostitution’.

Mimicking the gender-based double standards of Britain, and to ensure the cooperation of native men in the colonial project, heterosexual male sexual behaviour was left alone. Meanwhile, the colonial administration subjected the newly created ‘prostitutes’ to forcible genital examinations, making the bodies of a majority of Indian women subject to invasive scrutiny and assault by the British.

The idea was that when Brown women were classified as sexual deviants, their moral inferiority was reinforced in the eyes of the British public, giving the colonial presence the imprimatur of being reformist. So the British set about labelling everyone as prostitutes and criminals, painting a picture of the Indian ‘natives’ as sexually promiscuous and hence inherently lower life forms.

Similar legal restrictions, and associated violations of human rights, were put in place by the British in Hong Kong. Women were assigned different places to live within or outside the cantonment areas based on which men they ‘served’, and like their Indian sisters they were subject to forced genital exams.

These sorts of ordinances were still being implemented in parts of the British Empire as late as 1939. In that year, a group of Herero women in central Namibia held a protest in which they declared that their country was infected with a poison that could only be removed by a healer. The British decided that the poison referenced in the protest was venereal disease and immediately instituted laws that required unmarried Black women to submit to forced genital examinations for the purpose of rooting out the infection.

If the colonial British were to have come up with a television show based on their beliefs around sex, it would be called *Punishing Sex in the City*. Just as modern Westerners caricature all non-Western societies as grotesquely sexually repressed because the modern white feminist’s highest virtue is sexual freedom, so nineteenth-century whites assumed that non-Western societies were inherently licentious and sexually deviant, because the white women of the time aspired to modesty and sexual passivity. In both cases, a morally lesser antagonist is projected by default onto the form of the non-white other. And in both cases, the desire to ‘reform’ non-Western sexual norms has nothing to do with true knowledge and understanding of another culture. It’s not even anything to do with sex. It is about domination of the ‘other’.

Various strictures for controlling female sexual behaviour were enacted all through the British Empire under the pretext of ‘civilizing’ the local female populations. The reasons, beyond the overt misogyny of it all, was that the British needed the cooperation of colonized males in order to rule. Indian soldiers, for example, served in the British Army and quite literally permitted the vast machinery of the empire to function. Placing such

extreme limitations on what they could do in their personal lives would thus have been a greater problem for the British, likely fomenting rebellion (at an even greater rate than it already occurred). And so male sexual behaviour was left largely untouched. The consequence was that the sexual regulation of colonized societies by the British state ‘occurred almost solely through the control and classification of women’. [20](#)

The case of Kally Bewah, a high-caste Hindu woman who was found deceased in a shack near her home in colonial Calcutta, is an example of how even the dead body of an Indian woman was used as evidence of her moral depravity and inadequacy as a mother and a woman. The story is illustrative of how the bodies of women who may just have died in childbirth were turned into evidence of Indian women’s inadequate morals.

Bewah’s body had been found nude and partially decomposed, with bloodied clothes lying under her head. The coroner of West Bengal, a man named E. W. Chambers, conducted the autopsy sometime before 14 December 1885, and then summarized his findings in a letter to the Jury of Inquest. Chambers conjectured that Bewah, being an upper-class Brahmin widow, must, as a very ordinary matter of course, have been ‘unchaste’ and have engaged in illicit sex, then hidden the fact that she had sex outside marriage by trying to procure an abortion. Thus, if Kally Bewah was dead, it was because she more or less deserved to be. Her body was not the basis of any actual investigation into her cause of death; it was only proof that Hindu culture made its insatiable women into baby-killing sexual deviants.

Unsurprisingly, the jury of white colonial officials agreed with this interpretation, writing: ‘We are of opinion that Kally Bewah was really pregnant and that the inflammation of the womb from the effects of which Kally died was the result of criminal abortion or miscarriage.’ They concluded that, in doing so, she had ‘committed a rash and negligent act, and she should be committed under Section 304 of IP [Indian Penal] code’ as well as for ‘concealing birth’ under a separate code. [21](#)

Kally Bewah was already dead and obviously could not be committed anywhere, but that was beside the point. At the time, the laws against abortion in England were rarely if ever enforced; and yet the crimes of infanticide and feticide were vigorously enforced by the British in India, as further illustration of the moral contrast between the local population and

the paragons of virtuous white society. (A lot more on this issue in the forthcoming chapter.) The objective of the autopsy was never to find proof and convict Bewah's killer. It was instead to collect evidence to indict her culture, to garner support for the fantasy that Indian women were sexually promiscuous to the point of criminality and could only be 'reformed' through colonial intervention.

Wrapped up with this assumption of self-abortion was the implication that Brown and Black women were inherently deficient mothers, prone to neglecting and even killing their children. In colonial Congo, occupied by Belgium between 1908 and 1960, a time during which millions of Congolese were killed, there was systemic abduction of biracial children. These children were forcibly taken from their Congolese mothers and taken to a Catholic mission where they were cared for by nuns. When in 1961 the freedom struggle began and there was fear of violence, the nuns simply left, leaving the children to care for themselves. [22](#)

This prejudiced belief about mothers of colour, then contrasted with the Victorian archetype of the white matriarch as 'the angel of the hearth', persists today. Within the United States, Black mothers have been typecast for decades as 'crack mothers'. But this is simply another criminalizing framework, baldly used to prompt incorrect assumptions about the moral worth of a racial group. In the modern version of the rhetorical sleight of hand, it also conveniently obscures the economic conditions, created by white people in power, that drive the very cycles of poverty, addiction and crime which those white people then condemn as intrinsic. Likewise, Latina mothers are characterized as 'breeders': having many children but being unable to support those children – another symptom of economic suppression by white people which those white people then weaponize as supposed evidence of inferiority. And, following exactly the same pattern, Native American mothers are stereotyped as alcoholics, associated in the white imagination with fetal alcohol syndrome beyond all proportion to reality, and of course with no consideration given to the white-authored conditions which drive up addiction rates within a financially and culturally dispossessed community. [23](#)

From colonialism to neo-colonialism, whole populations are dismissed with the image of the failed non-white mother, held up as evidence of moral

inferiority and the incontrovertible need for Western altruism. The deep-rooted existence of these assumptions is put to use today by adoption agencies like International Adoption Help, whose website explains that ‘the easiest way to understand the type of child/children that become available for adoption in Guatemala is to realize that [they] become available by way of two different processes. The first is called “abandonment” and the second is “relinquishment”.’ ²⁴

Abandonment, according to this rubric, is ‘when a child has been abandoned by his/her biological family or when parental rights have been terminated by the Guatemalan government due to neglect’. Relinquishment is when a Guatemalan mother relinquishes the child’s care to a lawyer because of her inability to give maternal care. The implication of a widespread crisis in Guatemalan motherhood, one prompting a dedicated terminology by its sheer ubiquity, invites white American mothers to step in and rescue those children.

The non-white mother is thus ‘subalternized’ or rendered voiceless, sandwiched between the patriarchal pressures of her own culture and the nobility of the white mother. White women’s behaviour exists in perfect moderation in contrast to non-white mothers, who are all either too repressed or too incompetent to be appropriate role models to their own children – and those children are then available for rescue by acquisitive white women.

At the end of my term studying feminist theory in a graduate seminar of feminism, I wrote a paper about the efforts to repeal a Pakistani law that criminalizes fornication and adultery (one of the Hudood Ordinances). I argued that reform in Pakistan had to be culturally and religiously relevant. One of the analytical texts I offered as an example was written by a University of Wisconsin law professor named Asifa Quraishi, which utilized Islamic precepts to point out the grave errors in the currently drafted law.

In ‘Her Honor: An Islamic Critique of the Rape Laws in Pakistan from a Woman-Sensitive Perspective’, Quraishi tries to debunk the idea that Islamic law demands zina (adultery/fornication) prosecutions in the form in which they have been legislated and enforced in Pakistan, reframing the Islamic law as a tool for women’s empowerment rather than oppression. In

addition to Quraishi, I also discussed the work of Quranic scholar Amina Wadud, whose *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* had just been published, and who in 2005 had become the first American woman to lead a mixed-gender Islamic prayer service. Like Quraishi, Wadud argues that Islamic religious doctrine, interpreted for hundreds of years exclusively by men, has to be reclaimed by women. In this reclamation lie the possibilities of equality and empowerment.

I wanted to bring these women into the conversation, highlight the things they had to say, and perhaps even inspire my professor to use some of their work in the seminar. But in response to the paper I submitted, my course professor was predominantly concerned that I had not engaged with the texts that formed the bulk of our class discussions.

That was true. Those texts had overwhelmingly approached sex through the idea of pleasure and individual choice. I had tried to prove many things with my paper – primarily that sexual liberation was crucial, but not the sum total of empowerment. Instead of stating my arguments in the language of sexual consumption or delivering a Muslim vagina monologue, I wanted to make room for a feminist discourse that actually had relevance to Muslim women and others beyond the white Western feminist sphere.

My professor's lack of interest in Muslim feminists is an example of how ordinary instances of overlooking, sidelining and ignoring work accumulate and then ensure the larger project of marginalization and erasure succeeds. Even today, when the work of Black or Brown or Muslim feminists is included in gender studies classes, it is likely to be offered up merely as a side dish, with the main course being the white feminist texts. Where are the gender studies courses that mostly teach the work of feminists who belong to categories that are not 'white'?

The same mechanics of exclusion and erasure reappear at the activist level too. Black feminist and scholar Treva Lindsey has critiqued the way in which the history of anti-rape activism in the United States, for instance, is told as a white feminist story beginning in the 1970s. Yet anti-rape activism by Black women began in 1866, when a group of African-American women testified before the United States Congress about being gang-raped during the Memphis riots. Despite their courageous testimony, Congress refused to punish the perpetrators.

In the later nineteenth century, Black feminist activists Ida B. Wells and Fannie Barrier Williams founded and participated in anti-rape campaigns. But it wasn't until much later, in the final quarter of the twentieth century, that Black women were finally joined by white women who were just waking up to the necessity of campaigning on rape and sexual violence and had until then not made alliances with Black women. However, despite the fact that Black women were working on the issue for a century, it was white women whose interest is recorded as seminal in most feminist textbooks and discussions. [25](#)

In a more recent example, articles and discussions surrounding the #MeToo movement often leave out the fact that it was founded by a Black woman named Tarana Burke (and not Meryl Streep, Alyssa Milano and their celebrity cohort) in 2006. And little attention is given to the fact that in 2018 Burke criticized the #MeToo movement for ignoring the concerns faced by poor women in favour of those of white celebrities. In a keynote address at the Facing Race conference, Burke tried to convince her mostly Black and Brown audience to recommit to the movement: The No. 1 thing I hear from folks is that the #MeToo movement has forgotten us [Black, Hispanic and Native American women]. Every day, we hear some version of that. But this is what I'm here to tell you: the #MeToo movement is not defined by what the media has told you. We are the movement, and so I need you to not opt out of the #MeToo movement ... I need you to reframe your work to include sexual violence. That's how we take back the narrative. Stop giving your power away to white folks. [26](#)

When I was taking that grad class in feminist theory, few feminists were questioning compulsory sexuality or the push to understand everything about gender identity and gender relations through the rubric of sexuality. I first wrote about it for the *New Republic* in 2015, and even then it was still a relatively new idea. When that article went online, I received many letters from women, most of them Brown, who ardently agreed and told me how they had been waiting for such an argument.

Undoubtedly, the message was not a new one in more conservative countries like Pakistan, where the sexualization of Western societies is routinely critiqued and held up as a symbol of moral decay. But what I was saying was different; it did not come from a place of faith but rather from

one which saw the limits of the transformational power of 'sexy feminism' in a society where sex had been thoroughly co-opted by capitalism. And it identified the white feminist tendency to discard any critique of compulsory sexuality coming from a Brown Muslim woman as an expression of some latent discomfort with sex itself. I was criticizing the loss of feminism's power to take on capitalism.

A month before the *New Republic* article went to print, *The Nation* columnist Michelle Goldberg noted that: 'For a lot of people, the contemporary sexual regime celebrating pleasure above all else isn't that much fun.' Goldberg was discussing the work of Rachel Hills, an Australian feminist who spent several years documenting the consequences of sexual liberation for millennials; having sex, even a lot of sex, Hills argued, had become its own oppressive sexual convention.

Hills thinks that 'true female sexual autonomy doesn't just necessitate the right for women to have sex without stigma or judgement, although this is of course important. It also entails the right to confidently not have sex when it is unwanted or unavailable on the terms she might prefer.' She also presents findings from hundreds of interviews she has conducted, many of them stories from women who felt that they had to pretend to be more sexual than they were in order to fit into the ideal of the cool, hip feminist.

Magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and others marketed to women bolster this paradigm, pushing the achievement of orgasms, adventurous sex lives and the constant incorporation of novelty as the basis for a good and even healthy sexual life. All of this, Hills concludes, has led to the transformation of women from sexual objects to sexual subjects. While the former were policed by other people, the latter police themselves, watching and regulating their own behaviour in order to create for themselves an identity that fits the cultural ideal.

The co-opting of Western feminism by capitalism through the Trojan horse of sexual liberation can be witnessed anew as it turns its attention to queer culture. Concepts like *sexusociety* and compulsory sexuality are useful here not simply to point out the universal expectation for feminists to have sex and the tyranny of that pressure for asexual women, who are implicitly closed out of feminist acceptance. They also show how late capitalism continues its work in the name of sexual liberation, to commodify new sexual orientations.

Once a sexual orientation is essentialized and defined, it is then reborn as a market category of people to whom particular things can be sold. Freedom – even sexual freedom – is thus reduced to the freedom to consume and perform, rather than meaning justice or equality or the redistribution of resources. For political movements centred on these issues, the realm of possibility is submerged and subsumed by the commodifying capacities of capitalist enterprise.

Recognition of LGBTQIA+ identities has come to mean not just equal rights within legal systems but also voracious marketing to those who belong to them. Equality means corporate recognition of a consumer category, and the development of a consumerism which offers products to particular sexual identities, passing this off as a form of empowerment.

One example is the transformation of Pride Parades into cynical extravaganzas of rainbow-emblazoned products. As a 2018 article from *Wired* magazine noted, ‘everyone’, particularly large corporations, ‘wants to get in on Pride now’. Target sells ‘Love Wins’ t-shirts, Nike sells ‘Be True’ sneakers and Burger King even introduced the ‘Proud Whopper’ in some major metropolitan markets. Apple also got into the game recently, selling the the ‘Pride Edition’ Apple Watch wristband; and the energy drink Red Bull set up billboards that showed a row of cans in rainbow colours with the slogan ‘Wings for Everyone’. [27](#)

The sale of these products is not bad in itself, particularly to the extent that it normalizes LGBTQIA+ identities and promotes inclusion. The danger is that consuming such products becomes the primary way that people engage with these identities, ignoring the draconian histories of oppression and exclusion that LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced in a prejudiced culture, and the work that still needs to be done in so many communities to ensure basic acceptance and safety and equal rights. In the words of Angela Watercutter, ‘Did Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera take on the cops at Stonewall to sell T-shirts?’ [28](#)

The central question to ask about this ‘rainbow-washing’ is whether the radical potential of these freedom movements is curtailed or co-opted by corporations through the popularization of such targeted products. When sex sells in a society based on buying and selling, then everything becomes about sex, but only in the most superficial way. Politics, particularly the

politics of an intersectional feminism that is truly accepting and inclusive of LGBTQIA+ individuals, must be committed to the goal of justice and equality – beyond just the free expression of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Sex has also always been central to the ways in which white feminism places white women apart from – and above – women of colour. Black women are held up as dangerously hyper-sexual, too primal in their expression of their sexual needs and desires to be governable role models of empowerment. There is no Black protagonist in *Sex and the City*; if white women's sexual agency is an innovation to be celebrated, the same agency in Black women is a threat to the system, something to be tamed and brought within the bounds of white-defined decency.

A 2018 National Women's Law Center study found that Black girls are perceived by adults to be more sexually provocative than children of other races, and thus 'more deserving of punishment for a low-cut shirt or short skirt'. The same study reveals that Black girls are almost eighteen times more likely to be suspended from schools than their white peers, a gross disparity which again can be traced back to the fact that 'adults often see black girls as older and more sexual than their white peers, and so in need of greater correction'. [29](#)

If Black girls and women are too sexual and don't cover up enough, Muslim American girls, including those who are Black, are seen as covering up too much. One Black Muslim athlete was disqualified from her high school volleyball match because she refused to remove her headscarf; [30](#) another was asked to remove her hijab because the teacher didn't believe she was a real Muslim and assumed she was just doing it for attention. [31](#) A Muslim woman at the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Michigan was similarly forced to take off her headscarf by the Detroit police, who incorrectly claimed that she was legally required to remove it for her mugshot. [32](#)

All of these instances and examples add up and together formulate whose sexuality is considered sexy and whose is labelled deviant, and the lines between the two are racial lines. Thus the covering and uncovering of Black and Brown women is deemed as something to be disciplined and surveilled by law enforcement, while white women's sexuality is celebrated in

television shows and merchandise. As a consequence, white women flaunting their sexuality and sexual desire are merely being free and empowered and choosing this or that; while women of colour are acting based on cultural or religious pathologies that require correction.

Corporatized modernity's project of depoliticizing feminism has been aided by the emergence of strains of feminism that claim to be staunchly and definitionally non-judgemental about the substance of women's decisions. 'Choice feminism' is a term coined by former philosophy professor Linda Hirshman, who used it to 'name the widespread belief in the US that the women's movement has liberated women to make whatever choices they want'. ³³ While Hirshman focuses on the choices women make about wage work and unpaid labour in the home, choice feminism is now a much broader phenomenon. It responds to criticisms of feminism being too radical and too demanding, by abdicating wholesale from the basic moral responsibility of considering what is right and what is wrong.

Like sex-positive feminism, choice feminism is essentially fearful of politics, avoiding any challenge to the status quo by celebrating all women regardless of the choices they make, and abstaining from any form of judgement of their actions – even if damaging to other women – altogether. ³⁴ This allows women to sidestep the difficult work of making the personal political, demanding change of friends, family and lovers, acting on their principles in their daily lives, and making individual sacrifices for the collective good. In making everything feminist, it ensures that nothing is feminist.

The idea that contestation of any and all sorts is bad has been essential to the depoliticization of politics. Judgement, exclusion and calls for change are unavoidable parts of politics. If feminists are not to withdraw from political life altogether, they must acknowledge the difficulty of engaging in politics. Political claims are partial, and require selection and rejection, but it is in their partiality that they present the possibility of transformation.

Both sex-positive feminism and choice feminism minimize and sideline the concerns of the women who are most harmed by the current status quo – the women who are most motivated to call for real change. Instead, they prioritize the experiences of women who are sufficiently insulated from the

worst excesses of patriarchy and capitalism, and so feel no need for the collective or to engage in the arduous processes of consensus-building and contestation. Ironically, choice feminism actually ensures that those who are not benefitting from the status quo – from the untrammelled exercise of power and individuality that comes with white privilege – will never have choices beyond those they have at the present moment.

It is incontrovertible that women should have the ability to make choices – including sexual choices – and have complete dominion over their bodies, free of state intrusion. At the same time, defending the ability of women to make choices need not mean an abandonment of critiquing those choices in order to build a politically meaningful movement. It is also essential that the freedom to make choices is not reduced only to choices pertaining to sex. A woman's ability to make choices must always be protected, but so must the feminist project of challenging those choices when they obstruct possibilities of anti-capitalist empowerment and political solidarity.

Growing up in Pakistan, stuck as it was in its post-colonial hangover, I had no idea that pre-colonial Indian society – both Hindu and Muslim – had offered a wider variety of sexual relationships than the one the British left behind. Nor had I ever heard that controlling the 'insatiable' libidos of Hindu and Muslim women was on the agenda of British colonists, let alone that it was a main pretext for their intervention in 'native' matters.

I wish I could have written all this for my graduate seminar. I had broken every gender norm I had been raised with, had chosen education and independence – and all the struggles that came with it – with little support. The seminar's preoccupation with sexual pleasure instead of sexual politics seemed so disconnected to the feminism that I was trying so hard to model for my daughter. If only I could have known I was not alone, had been able to hear more of the voices of Muslim feminists like myself and discover the perspectives of other feminists of colour too. They were out there, in the midst of frontline struggles against terror, against religious obscurantism and against the weight of patriarchal domination, and yet they were excluded from white feminist discourse – as they always have been.

Many years have passed since that seminar in the basement room and I am more concerned than ever, as sex-positive feminism eviscerates critiques of imperial overtures abroad and encourages a deliberate deafness

towards all other dialects of empowerment – only because they won't affirm that freedom essentially and exclusively means the freedom to have sex.



6

Honour Killings, FGC and White Feminist Supremacy At the age of twenty-five, having been married to my husband since I was seventeen, I ran away to a domestic violence shelter. For months, I remained in hiding with my two-year-old daughter, afraid that her father would kill me. All the other women at the shelter to which I had fled, many of whom were white and American, were in hiding for more or less the same reason.

If my husband, who was of Pakistani origin but had spent his entire life in the United States, were to have killed me, it could automatically have been called an honour killing – because both of us were Muslim. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) definition of ‘honour killings’ states: Honor killings are acts of vengeance, usually death, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonor upon the family. A woman can be targeted by (individuals within) her family for a variety of reasons, including: refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce – even from an abusive husband – or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that ‘dishonors’ her family is sufficient to trigger an attack on her life. ¹

My death would have met these criteria. At the same time, so would the deaths of any of the white women I met at the shelter who faced the prospect of intimate partner violence because they had left a man or pursued a new relationship or had damaged the ego of some male in their lives.

Honour and ego, no one seems to have noticed, are iterations of the same forces of patriarchal dominance. 'Honour' makes sense to those in a collectivist society; 'ego' to those who live in an individualist one. But honour killing and ego killing are identical in their motivations to discipline and destroy women. The driving force in either case is a man who believes he is entitled to power over a woman's life.

Though the HRW definition does not specify that honour killings are limited to people of colour, it is an implicit white assumption. The label 'honour killing' would never be attached to any of the thousands of white-on-white cases of intimate partner violence. It is the presence of a Black or Brown male perpetrator that fosters the idea that a crime is determined by the cultural or religious identity of those involved.

As with so many cognitive biases in contemporary white feminism, this sort of labelling is traceable back to the agenda of colonialism. As we have seen, colonialism involved manufacturing new crimes and new classes of criminality to justify large-scale looting of goods and land and the theft of freedom, by denouncing the moral degeneracy of the people subject to this treatment. This was central to the civilizing mission of the colonizers.

In the mid-nineteenth century, abortion and infanticide were classified as crimes in India, and Indian women became a new class of criminals. The 1837 debates on the establishment of a uniform criminal code in India emphasized that 'even while there were no laws on abortion in England, the proposed criminal code must have laws against feticide because of its widespread prevalence in India where illicit sex led to illegitimate pregnancies'.² The colonial officials discussing the law who assumed that there were no laws against abortion in England were only partially correct; the Ellenborough Act of 1803 did criminalize abortion, but the law was rarely enforced.³ But regardless of that detail, the criminalization of the act in India would be easily accomplished.

In Britain at the time, sex outside monogamous marriage was considered just about the biggest threat to a socially ordered society. The social and legal ramifications for a woman found guilty of adultery were harsh, far-reaching and usually irrevocable. So there was no reason to believe that British women were not conducting covert abortions where necessary to conceal those illicit couplings, just as frequently as Indian women were. But whether or not they were concerned with abortion itself, the white colonizers were clever enough to realize that painting Indians as inveterate baby-killers, no matter the incidences of the same behaviour in white European women, was an ideal way to construct the colonized subject as criminal and hence strip them of their humanity.

In parallel to feticide, infanticide became another means by which to persecute Indian women. This despicable crime had long existed, in India as everywhere in the world, but in 1870 the British introduced the Infanticide Act, which decreed that though deaths of female infants could be attributed to men if context suggested their involvement, the deaths of all male babies almost automatically invoked prosecution of the mother.⁴ This reduction of complex situations into a singular apportioning of blame was a stark departure from customary practices – and from both logic and justice. Men, the British assumed, would never kill their own male descendants. And, unlike in Britain, women were actually convicted under the laws of infanticide, and many were sentenced to death for it.

The British had an ulterior motive in prosecuting Indian women for infanticide. Those women convicted of the crime but not sentenced to death could be transported as indentured labour to other colonies, providing a valuable source of unpaid labour for the empire.⁵ By the 1880s, the majority of female convicts transported within the Southeast Asian region of the empire were women convicted of infanticide.⁶ These same women were later also held responsible for the emergence of ‘vices’ such as prostitution arising in the settlements, becoming de facto scapegoats for the sexual appetites of the transported men. Meanwhile, back in India, reports suggest that four-fifths of all women imprisoned across the country had been convicted of killing their own babies.⁷

Of course, equivalent infanticide cases were met with a completely different treatment back home in England. In the late 1880s, the widow

Esther Bishop was tried for infanticide in Colchester. Her baby had been found dead in a laundry copper filled with water; the post-mortem investigation suggested strongly that it had been born alive and was subsequently drowned. The jury convicted Bishop of the ‘concealment of birth’. This was typical of conviction patterns for infanticide cases tried in England at the time – the majority were settled with a conviction based on a lesser offence. The juries were notoriously loath to convict their distressed white countrywomen of infanticide and so condemn them to death. ⁸

Infanticide is a horrendous act, but in the application of the statute British judges and magistrates in India did not account for the specific conditions of the women appearing before them. For many, the choice was to keep the baby and die themselves, punished by a husband or father for infidelity or sex outside marriage (without any way of guaranteeing that their illegitimate child would be cared for), or sacrifice their baby in order to keep their own life.

Even as they adopted the rhetoric of saving Indian women from barbarous men, the white judiciary demonized the same women for suffering the consequences of sexual double standards and patriarchal control, alleging that Indian women were so prone to promiscuity and illegitimate sexual relations that they required harsh and particular punishment. ⁹

White colonizers manufactured similar moral panic in response to sati – or as Europeans called it, ‘widow immolation’. ¹⁰ The rite – which was not strictly a religious practice – involves a Brahmin widow casting herself onto her husband’s funeral pyre, and it was rare in India even at the time. Large parts of the country did not practise the barbaric ritual at all; in other regions, it was restricted to certain castes. When the British first encountered sati, in the eighteenth century, witch hunts, trials and burnings were still being conducted across Europe and in the American colonies. ¹¹ Yet despite the many similarities in the ‘spectacle’ of burning women, and the purportedly moral underpinnings for doing so, white people apparently only recognized violence against women when it was perpetuated by what they saw as primitive, ‘other’ cultures.

The British refusal to note their own cultural brutalities stood in parallel with the refusal to recognize the brutality of colonialism itself. The wider

European Age of Discovery required claims of moral supremacy in order to justify colonial expansion and control. It did not matter that poor and largely powerless women at home in Britain and other European nations could be subjected to torture and then burned alive at the stake with a cheering audience from the village in attendance, nor that the practice of sati was at least in some cases nominally consensual – arguably a tiny step on from the entirely non-consensual process of witch-burning. The Indian ritual was primitive and extremist, and its European counterpart was a normal part of the maintaining of order.

To underscore this point, the British set about trying to prove not only that sati was a prevalent and integral part of Hindu culture, but that it must be banned on humanitarian grounds. They searched for evidence of the practice in Hindu sacred scripture, combing the 3,000-year-old Vedas (by no means easy as they were not properly codified, given the oral culture of the time) until they found a single reference which corroborated their own assumptions about sati, its religious character and its inhumanity. Thus they combined three imperialist moves: turning Hinduism into a monolithic religion based on scripture (which it was not); deciding which pundits' interpretations to accept as legitimate (crowning themselves the final arbiters of 'correct' Hinduism); and writing into historical existence a 'tradition' of sati (which remains highly debatable). [12](#)

Contemporary accounts of the act were penned by zealous British missionaries (few natives, let alone outsiders, had ever even seen sati happen), and then regurgitated by future travellers. These accounts are transparently motivated by constructions of the racial other as 'fundamentally incapable of providing either "normal" emotional relationships or physical safety from sickness, violence and even death without the benefit of Christian and in particular British interventions'. [13](#) Gleefully dramatic reports such as this one about a fourteen-year-old widow, published in the *London Magazine* in 1827, were often recycled again and again: She soon leaped from the flame, and was seized, taken up by the hands and feet, and again thrown upon it, much burnt; she again sprung from the pile, and running to a well hard by, laid herself down in the water-course, weeping bitterly ... At length, on her uncle swearing by the Ganges, that if she would seat herself on the cloth [that he provided] he

would carry her home, she did so, was bound up in it, carried to the pile now fiercely burning, and again thrown into the flames. [14](#)

The British passed legislation criminalizing sati in 1829. It was one of the very first statutory interventions that they made in India, and the egregious barbarity of the practice, duly emphasized, created the ‘moral’ case for imposing further colonial laws as over the next few decades the British presence transformed from a trading partnership into an occupation. Conveniently, sati narratives around this time begin to include the British intervention and its positive effects. In 1829, William Bowley of the Church Missionary Society described an account of a sati in which he intervenes and asks the widow, ‘Why do you destroy yourself?’ To this she responds, ‘My Thakoor [lord and husband],’ pointing to her husband’s corpse. Bowley then tells her, ‘This perishing corpse is not your Thakoor ... nor have you any relation to him now that he is dead. He came into the world alone, and is gone alone.’

Bowley manages to convince her to let her husband be burned at the pyre and postpone her own burning until the next day. Overnight, as Bowley tells his readers, he makes sure to have the widow guarded by Muslim police officers because he distrusts Hindus, who could drug and kill her. The following day, the widow confesses to Bowley that ‘all were her enemies’ among her community. Bowley, the hero, is now able to procure her rescue: ‘I told her that if none of her Relations would protect her, she might send to me, and I would see that justice was done her. I also got the Police Officers to offer their services in the event of being oppressed; and she seemed somewhat eased.’ [15](#)

Sensationalized narratives of sati and the Christian interventions that supposedly prevented it would remain in circulation throughout Europe for decades to come. So crucial was sati’s position in the European imagination that an account of it even appears in Jules Verne’s adventure *Around the World in Eighty Days*, published in 1872, almost fifty years after William Bowley’s account. In the novel, the British protagonist Phileas Fogg encounters the practice deep in an Indian forest. He and his travel companion, Passepartout, are told that the woman is shortly to be burned alive: And, if she were not, you cannot conceive what treatment she would be obliged to submit to from her relatives. They would shave off her hair,

feed her on a scanty allowance of rice, treat her with contempt; she would be looked upon as an unclean creature, and would die in some corner, like a scurvy dog. ¹⁶

In the sati of British colonial imagination, Hindus were imagined as hypnotized by Brahmanic texts and hence incapable of disobeying them. Ironically, this kind of obsessive fidelity to scripture was much more typical of Christian social norms than of the Hindu societies they sought to discredit.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out in her analysis of sati, the women of India were caught between the British claims to 'save' them by abolishing sati (and ushering in a raft of oppressive misogynist laws in the same breath) and the Hindu men who held that their women *wanted* to die with their husbands. Thus two patriarchal systems, with white men on one side and Brown men on the other, erased the Indian woman, leaving 'no space from where the sexed subaltern subject can speak'. ¹⁷ Testimonials from Hindu women, when they were actually asked, called into question the religious basis of sati, suggesting that the concerns of widows were predominantly material and social, and not religious. ¹⁸ The widows could not remarry, and if they did not have children (or even if they did) they had few means of supporting themselves or even protecting themselves from sexual violence, illegitimate pregnancies and so on. In some areas, such women – presenting a threat to the domestic order and the fidelity of others' husbands – had to live on the outskirts of villages with no social structures to support them. Sati was a rare response to an impossible situation, yet the white colonial conception of religion as 'the structuring principle' of Hindu society left no room for a wider consideration of the material hardship and social dimensions of widowhood.

The modern phenomenon of honour killings in Muslim communities links back to the colonial interventions of white British occupiers in India: not just in the authorship of the category as something other than domestic violence, but also in the prevalence of the phenomenon itself. As the British East India Company became a colonial administration in India in the eighteenth century, the traditional systems of law which existed under the

Mughals – such as Qazi courts, and grass-roots institutions for dispute resolution like village councils – found their power eviscerated.

Precolonial Islamic judicial practice involved a panoply of Qazi courts, which all followed different religious schools of thought, belonged to different sects and thus often made different rulings on the same question. These included the four main Sunni schools of thought and two Shia, all offering different interpretations of Islamic religious texts like the Quran and the Hadith. This intentional plurality of religious conflict resolution reflected a plurality of practices among the Indian Muslim population, and allowed communities to take their cases to the court that seemed most appropriate to their own practices and beliefs. It was a dynamic and responsive justice system which reflected the realities of daily life and evolved with the times. Its growth and evolution were in fact at the core of how law itself was conceptualized.

The British understanding of criminality, by contrast, was impersonal and top-down, divorced from the intimate contextual knowledge that the Indian justice systems possessed. ¹⁹ It was based on standardized legislation and the conservative concept of precedent (*stare decisis*), using past decisions as a means to guide future rulings. So they reorganized the judicial system in India to reflect their own model.

The earliest records of the British establishing their own courts in India date back to 1726, when the East India Company established Mayor's Courts in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. ²⁰ By 1786, Circuit Courts had been established, followed by subsequent reforms that gradually implemented the British version of codified Hindu or Muslim law along with British common law. Prior to this, neither Muslim nor Hindu law was codified. To console the Muslims and get around the historic pluralism, the British chose one among twenty or thirty different schools of thought to codify as 'Islamic law', rolling everything into a single statute that was said to represent a majority of Indian Muslims. But Islamic law, with its openness to interpretation, was inherently unsuited to codification, the entire purpose of which is consolidation into singular meanings. And so the original judicial system, which was much more tolerant of difference and responsive to changing social norms over time, was lost forever, leaving only the fossilized remnant installed by colonial overlords who cared little

for the natives they ruled over. (One legacy of this process can be seen in the zina laws punishing adultery discussed in the previous chapter – another example of a single interpretation of Islam, among many that had originally coexisted, being seized upon and standardized as a blanket rule.) Even after the British Empire disintegrated, the legacy of the rigid emphasis on one unified Islamic law persisted. Qazi courts had interconnected with (though were not entirely dependent on) the Mughal and Ottoman Empires, both of which were defeated by the British, whose legal system gradually replaced those courts. Today, Qazi courts – some informal and the others state-sponsored – do exist in some parts of the world, but none in the form they took before the British colonization of India and the sectioning-off of the Ottoman Empire.

The consequence of using this one-size-fits-all model is that judges have little or no licence to consider the individual circumstances of each case. And this in turn leaves the law open to abuse by bad actors. The problem is not so much with the individual statutes but rather that the statutory form itself is an inadequate representation of the society it aims to serve.

One example of this can be seen in Pakistan's 1990 Qisas and Diyat Ordinance, which allows family members of the deceased to pardon a murderer from their sentence after the payment of 'blood money'. ²¹ The law does not exclusively apply to honour crimes, but its existence often makes prosecution of honour killings difficult. The option of discretionary pardon would be a good idea in the context of a more pluralistic judicial system, where courts are able to consider the relevance of financial reparations for a crime on a case-by-case basis. Such a system could also allow the rejection of it when it is clearly being misused, such as in cases which involve an honour killing or suspected honour killing. But the legal consequence of applying the law indiscriminately is that it opens up a loophole to be exploited by the perpetrators of honour killings. When spousal homicide occurs, for example, members of the perpetrator's own family (since perpetrator and victim often belong to the same family) are usually able to step in and 'forgive' the killer. Anti-honour killing statutes in Pakistan have tried to undo the loophole but have had little or no success, because perpetrators then insist that their crime was not actually an honour

killing (and hence an exception to the blood money law) but simply a regular-variety murder.

Honour crimes are one of Western journalists' favourite subjects when reporting on the Muslim world. The assumption is that telling these stories somehow works to end honour crimes in general, ensuring the future safety of others who defy their families by raising the profile of the issue, putting it onto the international agenda. But the fact that rates of honour killings are actually rising in some parts of the world, despite Westerners' scrutiny, suggests this premise is faulty at best, and actively misleading at worst. ²² On the other hand, it is easy to see how such storytelling benefits the white Western journalists who engage in it (leading to the same kind of financial and reputational gains discussed in [Chapter 4](#)), and how it reassures white Western readers and 'saviours' of their own good fortune.

Any honest analysis of honour crimes would need to consider the social and material circumstances that foster intimate violence against women – in hundreds of thousands of cases of male partner violence in the US and UK, as well as in foreign lands. To take the example of Afghanistan, we need to begin by acknowledging a society whose familial and institutional structures have been broken by five decades of Soviet and US intervention. Romantic marital 'choice' is unavailable to nearly anyone, male or female, in Afghan society. Instead, marriage is generally seen as a means of cementing frayed communal relations in a war-torn land.

To take another example, in Jordan the fight against honour killings focused on the repeal of a law exempting from penalty a man who discovered his wife or a female relative committing adultery, and who then killed or injured one or both of the adulterers. Repealed in March 2017, ²³ it was actually taken from the Syrian Penal Code, which in turn is based on the Napoleonic French Penal Code, which shaped development of laws throughout the Middle East and North Africa. ²⁴ It was the French, then, who instituted leniency in cases of honour killing, while also giving it the charming name of *crime passionnel*.

The Jordanian reforms in 2017 also did away with the 'fit of fury' defence, which has been used to mitigate punishments in honour killing cases beyond the specific remit of discovering adultery. Judges are however still permitted to consider pleas by the victim's families for reduced

sentences for the perpetrators, who are often from the same family. The irony of this is that Jordan was considered by Human Rights Watch to have a high rate of honour crimes, and yet the United States, with its skyrocketing rates of intimate partner violence, was not.

In many jurisdictions of the United States, murder defendants may invoke the ‘heat of passion’ defence, whose validity is judged by similar criteria as the Jordanian law and which, if accepted, means more lenient penalties – changing the category of the crime from murder to the nonsensically titled ‘voluntary manslaughter’. Proving heat of passion requires an inquiry into whether the defendant was ‘obscured’ or ‘disturbed’ such that a reasonable person, sufficiently provoked, could act from passion rather than judgement: the most common example being the sudden discovery of spousal adultery. Some jurisdictions characterize this as ‘extreme emotional disturbance’. [25](#)

All of these defences help to exonerate male perpetrators of violence against women, and legal scholars have noted that the substance of heat of passion defences is similar to those offered up by domestic abusers who batter their wives. Westerners perceive honour killings as endemic to ‘foreign’ cultures and proof of their particular barbarity, while continuing to use heat of passion defences in their own legal systems. Violence against women in ‘other’ countries is an indictment of religion, culture and the particular depravity of the people, while the same violence in white countries is considered an aberration, particular to the individual who commits the crime rather than a nationally endemic pattern of misogyny and toxic masculinity.

But acknowledging that honour killing is comparable to violent crimes perpetuated against women everywhere in the world would cast into doubt one of the main moral edifices of the imperial endeavour. It would necessitate the sort of scrutiny of the violence of white men in which white patriarchal powers have no interest. Instead, ‘honour killing’ must be an incomprehensible exotic phenomenon driven by mysterious cultural imperatives.

Not only does this characterization generalize grossly about Black and Brown cultures, it also does a tremendous disservice to white women, obscuring the true extent of the poison of gender-based violence and its tacit

acceptance by legal systems rooted in English common law and the Napoleonic Code.

Certain ‘cultural crimes’ (honour killings, female genital cutting, child marriage, etc.) are now set apart from universal, ‘normal’ crimes by the implication of a wider cultural complicity found only in Black and Brown cultures, where indigenous feminisms have been unable to eradicate them. White women – the superior feminists, we are expected to assume – have been able to transform their culture in the way that these other women have not. Yet given that the moral architecture of colonialism depended on the casting of the native as morally inferior, it is essential to question those assumptions. The very idea of cultural crimes specific to those colonized peoples, and laden with an insistently heightened moral disgust, allowed colonists to paint local populations as inherently morally abject. Thus coercive and exploitative colonial intervention could be recast as a benevolent and necessary civilizing presence.

Like sati and honour killing, the practice of female genital cutting fosters moral outrage in which the West stands on the right side and anyone trying to introduce the complexities of the issue into the debate is discredited as a secret supporter of the practice. There can be no discussion, for instance, of whether the practice of a small nick or cut for cultural or religious rituals (not wildly distinct from the traditional practice of the bris for male Jewish infants) is the moral equivalent of full clitoridectomies. Nor is the epidemic of self-harm among Western teenaged girls who cut themselves generally seen as a symptom of a barbaric culture in the same way. And even though the practice involves a tiny percentage of Arab and African women, former president Donald Trump and his allies used it to call out feminist opponents of the Muslim ban, like Elizabeth Warren, as hypocrites.

In her essay ‘Who Defines “Mutilation”?’ anthropologist Courtney Smith challenges the hegemony of Western feminist discourse surrounding female genital cutting (FGC) by conducting an analysis of what a group of Senegalese women thought about breast augmentation versus what a group of American women thought of female genital cutting. She proposes the comparison not to suggest an equivalence between a harmful practice carried out on minors versus one chosen by adult women, but rather to reveal how much cultural frames influence our judgement of various

practices. As Smith describes it, both groups seemed confounded by each other's choices, with American interviewees seeing FGC as a 'castration of women' and an effort to 'keep them down', and Senegalese women saying about breast augmentation that 'no man should ever push his wife to do that'. But there were also women in both groups who could see the other's perspective.

One American interviewee observed: 'When I think about it, plastic surgery is kind of similar to genital cutting. Sort of like, you are cutting your body to fit a mold, to define who you are through physical attributes. A lot of women who are older get botox – they want to be attractive and beautiful and young again. Who told you that that is how to do it?' Similarly, a Mandinka woman interviewed in Touba in Senegal said, 'In Senegal, excision is similar to breast implantation because something is changed or taken away from the woman in both of them.'

Even more interesting is the statement of a development worker who was engaged in spreading information about the adverse health consequences of FGC, who said, 'If there are health consequences, there are health consequences. There aren't Western consequences and African consequences and there aren't American women and African women. There are just women whose bodies are being transformed.'²⁶

Other scholars, like the anthropologist Saida Hodžić, have pointed out how the Western zeal for manufacturing 'modern' African subjects often lies behind the discourse on FGC, promising that the elimination of FGC will make countries like Ghana (where Hodžić did her research) fully modern. One of Hodžić's discussions with a representative of a reproductive rights NGO in Ghana illustrates the misunderstandings that define the Western approach on this score. This particular NGO had been in charge of providing 'sensitization' training on FGC. Included in the training were questions like 'Why call it Female Genital Mutilation?' to which the answer was 'The World Health Organization has a definition and we all must use it.'

Pushing this kind of sensitization training, Hodžić says, requires NGOs to desensitize themselves to the actual needs and views of rural communities so that they can push a moral binary that is not based in their reality. She describes meeting Olivia, a volunteer with the Ghana

Association for Women's Welfare, who work directly with rural populations, and asking her about the biggest problem facing women in poor and rural parts of Ghana. Olivia immediately responds with 'economic problems'. Women like Olivia, however, have few options, because donors prefer funding educational workshops to helping with the redistribution of material resources.

Another NGO, Rural Help Integrated, chose to pursue a 'holistic' approach and ordered grinding mills for use by the rural women – a decision questioned by a United Nations Population Fund representative, who asserted that there was no connection at all between reproductive health and the mills. According to Hodžić, 'had rural women been included in the discussion, they would have vehemently disagreed'. The mills greatly reduced the hours the women had to spend manually grinding millet, allowing them to rest and regain their strength – thus ensuring better health outcomes. [27](#)

As Courtney Smith writes at the end of her study on FGC and breast augmentation, it is crucial to create dialogue between cultures. She advocates for 'the possibility that we will learn from our encounters with other human societies to recognize things about ourselves that we had not seen before'. [28](#) Dialogue occurs when both sides of a conversation feel that they are, at least to some extent, on *equal* ground. But the enduring frame of white saviourism, and the belief that white Westerners are in charge of eliminating practices like FGC, makes it nearly impossible to hold this kind of conversation.

One example of the ways in which this racist framework blocks meaningful communication and progress is seen in Sara Johnsdotter's study of cases of compulsory genital cutting in Swedish-African girls. Sweden was the first country in the world to criminalize FGC, in 1982, and has been extraordinarily interested in cracking down on suspected parents since then, even though the number of cases in Europe as a whole and Sweden in particular (as well as in the home countries of most of the suspects) are very low.

According to a law passed in Sweden in 1997, a girl or young child can be subjected to a genital exam without the knowledge and permission of the child's legal guardian if they are suspected of having undergone FGC.

Looking through police files of 122 FGC cases, Johnsdotter found numerous examples of incorrect reporting. In one case, a teacher noticed that a six-year-old child in her class was taciturn and secretive after a visit to Somalia. She immediately reported this as a suspected FGC to the authorities. The parents, afraid of being prosecuted, agreed to an examination. Two gynaecologists who examined the girl found that her labia minora were missing. The prosecutor was willing to press charges, but when the girl was examined again by a paediatrician, that doctor pointed out that the child's labia were completely intact. The prosecutor was so incensed that he accused the parents of having taken a different girl to the exam.

In another case, Johnsdotter reports, a father was nearly sent to jail because his daughter had been in a car accident in which her genitalia were outwardly impacted. Later, during a subsequent, unrelated surgery, one of the nurses noticed the scarring and assumed that FGC had taken place. The racism and xenophobia in these compulsory exams, and the racist suggestion of the prosecutor who accused the parents of having brought a different Somali child to be examined by the doctors, is simply accepted. ²⁹

A 2018 study of FGC across Africa showed that the numbers of girls and young women undergoing the procedure have fallen from 71 per cent to 8 per cent in the past twenty years, ³⁰ owing largely to the work done by indigenous African women. Countries like Sweden, the United States and the UK, however, continue to use the practice as a means of typecasting migrants travelling to and from Africa. In 2016, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), in collaboration with the UK government, initiated Operation Limelight, an effort to crack down on perpetrators of female genital mutilation at British and American airports. Designed by the Homeland Security Investigations' Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Center, Operation Limelight seeks to 'bring awareness to Female Genital Mutilation [FGM] and deter its practice through the education of the public about the relevant risks'. ³¹

Conveniently, the data used by ICE to justify the need for this programme relies on old studies and shoddy methodological procedures. ³² The statistics, which were referenced in the press statements about the initiation of Operation Limelight, all originate in a paper titled 'Female

Genital Mutilation/Cutting in the United States: Updated Estimates of Women and Girls at Risk, 2012'. ³³ The paper took the number of female immigrants from various African and Middle Eastern countries and multiplies it by the rates of FGC prevalent in those countries to conclude that the risk of FGC in the US had increased threefold since 1990, with over half a million women and girls in danger.

To address this crisis, agents who have received FGC-related training are stationed at large airports, where they select individuals from 'high risk' countries to provide with 'educational material' about FGC, with the intention of deterring them from carrying out 'vacation cutting' (taking girls to receive the procedure in countries where it is legal). An ICE press release indicates that this material comes with some degree of conversation or even questioning of the chosen recipients: 'Agents engaged approximately 700 individuals in the international terminal destined for Dubai, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Cairo, and San Salvador. Approximately 40% of passengers were traveling with children. Flight crew and airline employees in the international areas were also provided materials for additional outreach.' ³⁴

These interactions may seem innocuous to non-immigrants, but they can be fraught experiences of powerlessness for immigrants who likely have no option but to answer the questions posed by ICE officials, do not know if a physical examination is forthcoming, and also do not know whether the exchange will have immigration consequences for them. ³⁵ Understanding the terror of these interactions requires that white women see past their own privilege and learn to empathize with women who do not have the power to say no to such intrusions. Few details exist of what sorts of questions are asked of these people by ICE agents. ICE is, however, quite proud of Operation Limelight having won a 'World Class Policing Award'; a photo on their website from the event, held in London, shows four white people grinning and beaming as they hold the award they have been given for their alleged concern for the health of African women and girls. ³⁶ Meanwhile, needless to say, the affected communities were not consulted or involved in determining what programmes would be most effective in bringing about desired change.

The level of intrusion that is considered acceptable in policing FGC is never passed through any sort of community consensus, let alone consent.

Anyone who is Black or Brown, Muslim or Somali, anyone who may critique this sort of airport thuggery by ICE officials allegedly ‘protecting’ girls of colour, is automatically tossed onto the pile of secret supporters of the practice. Since the culture that permits FGC is itself considered bad, and community members automatically complicit unless they insist otherwise, it is only Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents of an increasingly white nationalist state who can do the job. But there is no meaningful public health dimension to this intervention. If it was truly about concern for girls being forced into this practice, an appropriate agency to be tasked with the matter would be the Department of Health and Human Services not Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But instead the possibility of the practice becomes the basis of racial profiling and demonization of immigrants from certain countries over others.

There is no clear evidence of what exactly ICE was doing with FGC suspects, but there are cases of alleged forced hysterectomies performed by US officials on migrant women in detention. Exerting dominion over Black and Brown bodies to instigate fear in female migrants and asylum seekers, the Trump administration weaponized a contemporary version of the forced genital examinations carried out by British administrators in the Indian colonies.

Officially, ICE is authorized to test for STDs among detainees. In late summer 2020, a whistleblower who had worked at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC) in Ocilla, Georgia, filed a complaint with the Department of Homeland Security, ICE and the warden of the ICDC about an unusual number of hysterectomies being carried out on the centre’s female detainees. The procedures were allegedly performed outside the facility at the nearby Irwin County Hospital, on immigrant women, many of them unable to speak any English, who did not authorize their surgeries with proper informed consent; rather, they were treated as if communication were unnecessary. When they awoke, many were confused about what had been done to them. Nor was it easy to figure it out.

On 21 October 2020, an independent medical review board tasked with looking into the allegations found ‘a disturbing pattern’ in which women were being pressured to have gynaecological surgery. They said it was possible that the ICDC was complicit in what was happening, referring women to the gynaecologist even when they did not have gynaecological

complaints. The staff required women who were resisting the surgeries or exams to have psychiatric evaluations. The review board's analysis of the medical charts of the detainees found a lack of adequate documentation of their histories, their level of comfort with gynaecological exams and most of all their need for surgery. 'Surgery,' the board wrote, 'was overly aggressive, without demonstration of medical necessity.' ³⁷

For its part, ICE has set about deporting the women who have made the complaints. This delegitimizes their claims by framing them as illegal migrants in the first place, and it also sinks the whole complaints process mid-flow. After all, if the women are not able to provide interviews and participate in the court process because they're not in the country anymore, their cases fall apart and ICE can proceed with their activities unchecked. According to one Columbia University law professor working on the issue, the speed of deportations actually increased following President Trump's defeat in the 2020 election and ICE is actively destroying evidence, rushing to ensure its illegal procedures are not questioned by the incoming administration. ³⁸

It is worth remembering that the forced hysterectomies in the US have precedent. As recently as the 1970s, Latina women in Los Angeles were forcibly sterilized because they were held responsible for increasing population. ³⁹ Like these women, and like the Indian women who were labelled prostitutes and the Namibian women who were subjected to genital examinations by British colonial authorities, migrant women coming to twenty-first century America are seen by government and detention staff as less than human. The old patterns of domination do not disappear with time.

The story about forced hysterectomies at the Irwin County Detention Center broke the week before the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on 18 September 2020. While the death of the Supreme Court justice provoked debate among white feminists about the future of reproductive rights in the United States, almost none of them connected feminist organizing around reproductive rights to the forced hysterectomies on minority women in captivity allegedly being carried out at the behest of the American state. Amid all the discussion about bodily freedoms, the use of state power to prevent Black and Brown women from reproducing was somehow lost.

White women's 'feminist advocacy' around 'cultural' crimes like honour killings and FGC actually compounds the injuries done by the crimes themselves, by stripping their survivors of agency. In addition to suffering the cruelty and depravity of the crime, local women find themselves devalued or silenced by foreign 'saviours' who see them as victims unable to advocate for themselves. And in aid contexts, feminists of colour must follow the lead of white-women-led programmes and advocacy plans if they are to access funds that permit them to work on the issue. At the same time, others in their communities might then perceive them as beholden to white feminists, isolating and even penalizing them for this complicity.

At domestic abuse shelters in Indiana, first as a resident and then seven years later as an attorney, I could not help but notice that there was no white abuse or Brown abuse or Black abuse; it was all just abuse. The same despicable taxonomies of misogyny, entitlement and dominance appeared again and again in abusers' language and in their behaviour. Women who dared go against their partner, or any other abusive family member, were afraid for their lives – just like I was in their position. They worried about custody of their children, the future beyond the shelter, the economics and logistics of surviving, while always looking over their shoulders.

The rhetoric around violent crimes, just like the rhetoric around international development, or war, or sexual freedom, celebrates white women as having gone further in their battle for equality than Black or Brown feminists. This hierarchical relationship with women of colour suits the interests of white men, whose violence is seen as qualitatively different and morally superior to the violence of men of colour. Meanwhile, white women who imagine themselves terribly lucky not to fear honour killings or FGC can believe that the crimes committed on their own bodies are somehow less of a cultural and social problem than those committed on Black or Brown bodies. Thus divided, white and Black and Brown feminists are much less likely to create trouble at home or take collective action against patriarchy at the global level.

The hope for change has to come from discarding such hierarchies. It must come from building collective organizations which can resist the pressure placed on vulnerable and traumatized women to act as proof of white countries' superior enlightenment, empowerment and international status. Only then can feminists attempt to create the dialogic spaces in

which solidarity can flourish. Only then will it be possible for women to work with each other, to discern what is universal in the issues that confront them, and to realize the possibilities of cooperation.



7

‘I built a white feminist temple’

In 1979, poet, feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde addressed the New York University’s Institute for the Humanities Conference. Her speech, titled ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, asked: If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? ¹

Ten years after Lorde’s famous speech, Kimberlé Crenshaw, then a law professor at Columbia University, wrote a groundbreaking critique of three court decisions on Title VII (anti-discrimination) cases, in which she showed that within existing legal frameworks, Black women could only be protected from discrimination to the extent that their claims aligned with either Black men or white women. ²

In *Moore v. Hughes Helicopters*, the case I find most striking, the issue came down to whether a Black woman could claim to represent all women in the way white women did when alleging discrimination under Title VII. Moore, the plaintiff, had alleged that the employer practised race and sex discrimination by not promoting women and Black employees to senior positions. At trial, her attorneys introduced statistical evidence that showed

that there was a significant disparity between men and women in promotions and also Black men and white men. Moore was asking the court to certify 'Black women' as a class, so she could then pursue a discrimination case on their behalf specifically. This request was refused, and in a court of appeals it was held that because Moore had asked for class certification on behalf of Black women there 'were serious doubts as to [her] ability to adequately represent white female employees'. In other words, white women could represent discrimination against *all* women, but Black women could not. This was because when white women alleged gender discrimination, it was a pure gender claim, unlike when Black women represented all women. ³

In her analysis, Crenshaw points out that Black women such as the plaintiff are located at the intersection of both racial discrimination and gender discrimination. To limit them to legal consideration within just one of these categories denies them equal justice with individuals who occupy just one protected class, because it does not make any attempt to understand the particularities of their position. Crenshaw writes that there will be no justice for Black women, or any women of colour, if jurists do not consider both race and gender in their analysis. She calls this idea 'intersectionality', explaining that: 'Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.' ⁴

Crenshaw's analysis does not just take legal theory to task; she emphasizes the necessity of transforming existing systems of power at every level of society. She recounts the experience of Black feminist activist Sojourner Truth when she addressed a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio, well over a hundred years before, famously asking 'Ain't I a woman?' Many white women present wanted her to be silenced because she would draw attention away from the cause of suffrage and towards the cause of emancipation from slavery. Crenshaw underscores the enduring reality that 'the difficulty that white women have traditionally experienced in sacrificing racial privilege to strengthen feminism renders them susceptible to Truth's critical question. When feminist theory and politics that claim to reflect *women's* experience and *women's* aspirations do not

include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask: “Ain’t We Women?””

Building on the work of Audre Lorde, Crenshaw’s focus is on how minority women suffer at the hands of a system that was never made to accommodate them or has no capacity to make them whole. ‘These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure,’ she writes, refusing to believe that the mere recognition of identity is the sum total of what a society and a state can do in response to discrimination. Adding Black women to systems that have long excluded them as appendages representing ‘diversity’ is not the answer.

In the thirty years since her seminal article was published, Crenshaw’s conceptualization of structural inequality and systemic racism has become integral to understanding the experiences of non-white women within a white-dominated world. In a 2005 article focusing on the complexities of intersectionality, feminist theorist Leslie McCall called it ‘the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies in conjunction with related fields has made so far’. ⁵

Feminist theorist Christine Bose has further expanded on the theory to note its relevance to feminists beyond the United States, emphasizing that ‘US scholars should not be surprised that an intersectional approach is useful to European, Asian, or African scholars studying inequalities in nations with diverse native populations or polarized class structures, or with increasing numbers of migrants and contract workers from other countries’.

⁶ Scholar and author Momin Rahman has applied the theory in his crucial essay ‘Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay Muslim Identities’. ⁷ Others are focusing on understanding intersectionality as a research methodology or as the basis for policy initiatives in gender inclusion.

And yet as Black women apply intersectional analysis to understand their experience of discrimination, white women must analyse the other side of the coin: their experience of privilege. Discussion of the intersection of whiteness and womanhood remains a taboo, particularly when it prods at the complicity of ordinary white women who have benefitted from white privilege and the role they play in propping up a racist system. This is particularly true in the elite, professional circles where white Western

women are most likely to identify as feminist but are so ensconced in their bubbles of privilege that they cannot make the empathic leap to consider that discrimination they don't see is real and has a profoundly negative impact on the lives of everyone living outside the white bubble.

Part of the problem, as Crenshaw shows us, is that 'the authoritative universal voice – usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity – is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics'. ⁸ In other words, white women take on the voices of white men. And that is considered progress. Institutions that were once male-led institutions and are now female-led continue to practise the same kinds of exclusions, derisions and erasures. Yet everyone congratulates themselves on having chalked up a win for feminism; for all women.

Crenshaw's description of theory matches my own experiences in practice. The women I worked with while serving on the board of Amnesty International USA were familiar with feminist theory and how a male-dominated system encourages white women to re-enact the same exercises of silencing and domination that they have themselves experienced. And yet it is still so tempting for white women to interpret their own ascent as a matter of pure merit, and their own quest for parity as the most urgent priority. It is so easy to be unconcerned with domination, silencing and oppression when they are perpetrated on those you barely see. So effortless to replicate those unthinking, convenient sins as you forge towards the glass ceiling, teeth gritted.

The cult of individualism, and the resultant form of feminism made notorious by women like Sheryl Sandberg and to some extent by Gloria Steinem before her, encourages every woman who reaches power to believe she got there on her own and without any free passes. The suggestion that racial privilege may have played some role in her rise, that white men are more willing to cede power to white women, is an intolerable threat to this mythology of the self-made superwoman. Late capitalism's individualist reading of success is very much a part of the American dream of self-improvement through hard work, promoting the illusion that the system is fair and that it rewards effort in a linear and consistent way. In reality, all of it is a ploy to drive productivity so that the white men at the top of the

pyramid continue to get richer. But it benefits white women too, to a lesser but still very real extent.

As a consequence, white feminists have largely ignored intersectionality as it pertains to their own lives and careers. Many white feminists are upset by the accusation that white women have largely upheld and endorsed the racial inequities that were in operation at a time when men dominated all and everything. Most, including the chair of the board who I served under at Amnesty International, would vehemently and passionately endorse intersectional feminism as a concept. But, in practice, ambition, self-preservation or the need to hold on to an ideology of self-made success seems to intercede. There is no ceding space or voice or power; feminists of colour who want to function within this system must cater to white feminists and laud their ascent regardless of their own situation.

Coming to understand Crenshaw's arguments has given me strength and purpose. And yet, throughout my years as a lawyer, as an activist and as an author, I've had to question whether to continue to participate in white structures that prescribe a limited and tokenizing role for women of colour. Like many other feminists of colour, I have wondered whether these existing structures can be dismantled and remade from the inside, or whether they must be abandoned altogether.

As we deconstruct various aspects of the feminist movement and expose the role of whiteness as a hegemonic, regulating force within feminism, the question still remains unresolved: should women of colour construct feminisms of their own and forget about cross-racial solidarity, or should they persist within structures that are led by and tailored to the needs of white women?

'I built a white feminist temple. And now I'm tearing it down,' wrote Black feminist Layla Saad in a blog post that went viral in 2018. In the post, Saad speaks about her experience of building a life-coaching business called Wild Mystic Woman. Saad used predominantly Black women's imagery in her branding, and she, a Black woman, was ultimately in charge of things. Yet the truth, Saad confesses, was that she catered mainly to white women: The unintentional default in most online businesses (regardless of who runs those businesses) is that whiteness is centered. White imagery, white clients, white perspectives, and white narratives of success, empowerment

and spirituality dominate this industry. This is because this industry reflects the white supremacy ideology that white is seen as ‘universal’ and applying to all, and non-white is seen as ‘other’ and applying only to those who are non-white. ⁹

Saad’s confession was a commitment to do better, to ‘tear down this white feminist temple’ that her endeavour had become. It signified that even with a commitment to racial and gender justice, it is most often easier to inhabit the systems that we find ourselves in than to dismantle them because of their inequity.

Many white women perform wokeness quite well, carefully asking for the correct pronunciation of your name in front of others and posting black squares on their social media accounts when a Black man or woman is murdered in particularly egregious circumstances. Even more are in the habit of appropriating the culture of people of colour to boost their own cosmopolitan credentials: Instagram grids awash with butter chicken and turmeric lattes, peppering their speech with ‘bae’ and ‘twerk’ and ‘fuckboy’ and ‘basic’ (all words appropriated from Black slang). But there is a sense in which the reverse is also true. Women of colour engage in adopting white standards in their own lives, and so are co-opted into the perpetuation of their own oppression. Sometimes they assimilate these beliefs from being constantly bombarded with them by cultural forces; at other times they oppose them but do not feel safe speaking out.

For some white women, public empathy for people of colour can be a matter of gilding their status. For women of colour, it is a question of survival and not a choice. Whiteness confers powers that can yield professional and personal success, and generally make life far better than it might be otherwise. Many non-white feminists have spoken out against white-centred feminism, but many more are caught in personal, professional or economic circumstances too precarious to risk, finding themselves with no opportunity to confront the monolithic structures of white power, or indeed to confront the defensive white women who are more interested in feeling good about themselves than having an egalitarian feminist conversation.

One example of this came from a friend of mine, a woman of colour who got a job at a fancy new start-up: a women’s club geared primarily towards

middle-class, urban white women. My friend had a long and notably Indian name, so the CEO of the company, a white woman, started to call her by a shortened version that she devised herself. My friend complained about it to me, so I was shocked when, at a talk arranged by her company, the same CEO got up on stage and introduced my friend by the nickname and not her actual name. Then, when my friend took to the stage, she too used the nickname to refer to herself. Not knowing how to correct her boss without jeopardizing her job, she had simply given in.

I know of examples where white college lecturers have taught books that castigate Islam and demonize the veil, even when there were students who wore it in the classroom. Many of these students did speak up to university officials, but the academics in question had tenure and so ultimately nothing was done. These sorts of interactions not only ignore the tremendous power difference between professor and student, they ignore the way power dynamics between white people or within academia work to further delegitimize narratives from communities of colour. The ‘white saviour feminist’ professor is in this sense a central culprit in pushing West-centred narratives, not least the right of white Western women to pass judgement on women in the rest of the world. Recognizing these power dynamics means that white feminists will experience an unpalatable de-privileging of their perspective – one they will not be used to – but meaningful allyship requires just this.

It’s hard not to see the way things are as the way things will always be – and as soon as you start to believe that, speaking out against the million microaggressions, let alone the many larger structural ones, becomes an act of pointless stupidity and self-sabotage. Better to be the good handmaiden of mainstream feminism, assuring white women that they are doing everything right, and that complaints are the product of hypersensitivity or misunderstanding or jealousy – anything other than the dominant power of whiteness within feminism itself.

A few years ago, I was invited to lunch at the women’s caucus of the Indiana General Assembly. When I arrived, my host requested that I address the gathered women about the issues facing women in South Asia and also about honour killings. Put on the spot in this way, I could not say no.

My audience's fervent questions and interruptions made clear that they were most interested in hearing about the honour killings. I spoke honestly and factually about the brutal details. While I tried to emphasize the complexity of the issue, I had not had time to prepare. So I did not address the ways in which honour killing is functionally equivalent to intimate partner violence, nor did I tell them that 'honour' is a euphemism for the male ego, which is seen to act alone in America and in the name of the collective in Pakistan. I told the binary story of good and evil that they were expecting.

At the time I did not recognize the purpose of the event. I found out later that my host, an extremely well-intentioned, liberal feminist, had invited me to speak because she wanted the caucus, a mixed group of Republican and Democratic women, to have something that they could agree on. That something, she had decided, was a collective shudder and sigh at the terrible plight of foreign women who did not have their rights and privileges. It was a bipartisan issue that allowed white feminists of different political affiliations to speak to each other.

In retrospect, I made a bad situation worse by my cooperation. I did not know how to separate the facts of honour killing from the frame of white feminist superiority which they invited; I had actively corroborated the white women's stereotypes about Brown and Muslim women. The white feminists had ceded space, allowed me to speak, but only on the condition that I indict the culture of my birth, and affirm, at least indirectly, the supremacy of America, of white women, of Western civilization. It was a victory for white feminism, and I had enabled it.

It is not that culturally coded crimes aren't crimes. But there is a problem in so readily attaching a cultural dimension to intimate partner violence that takes place in Brown and Black communities to indicate that it is somehow different or more brutal. Such insinuations demand that feminists of colour denounce their racial or cultural communities if they are to participate in feminist discourse.

When Westerners focus on particular crimes in Afghanistan or Ghana, they create stunted forms of resistance where everything that is the focus of Western attention for 'moral reform' is suddenly the most authentic expression of culture. Feminists in these communities get branded as agents of the West, and indigenous cultural opposition that would have castigated

honour crimes or FGC are destroyed when the calculus becomes 'the West against the rest'. This then fosters a narrative in which white, Western cultures are amenable to feminist transformations, while endemically barbaric non-Western cultures perennially lag behind them. And if there is no parity between feminists who are having the conversation, gender parity as a whole becomes an unreachable goal.



8

From Deconstruction to Reconstruction

In June 2020, while I was writing this book, the *Daily Beast* published an in-depth report of racism within the National Organization for Women (NOW) ¹ – America’s oldest and largest feminist organization, with six hundred chapters across all fifty states. ² For decades, NOW has been a very white organization, despite the invaluable contributions of Black activists like Pauli Murray and Aileen Hernandez to its original foundation. ³ One of the *Beast*’s case studies was NOW’s 2017 leadership election, which included an all-women-of-colour ticket for the first time in the organization’s history. China Fortson-Washington, an African-American woman, ran for president; with Monica Weeks, a young Hispanic feminist, as vice president on a combined ticket. But in the weeks of their campaign, they faced noticeably more hostile audiences than any previous candidates, or indeed than their opponents in that year’s race did. Speaking at the Brevard County chapter in Florida in June, Weeks was heckled for saying that – as the most oppressed – women of colour, disabled and LGBTQIA+ people needed to be given a voice to make everybody better. A white woman interrupted her, saying, ‘White women, too!’ and another yelled, ‘Just the women with the pussies!’ No such interruptions or heckling took place when white women were speaking.

That same month, Weeks and Fortson-Washington addressed the audience at NOW’s annual convention as part of their bid for president.

They said they had faced discrimination from NOW members from the very beginning, and one had told her to ‘tone down the Hispanic thing a little bit’. Others dismissed Fortson-Washington as ‘angry’ and Weeks as a ‘hot-headed Latina’. When Fortson-Washington took to the stage on the final night of the convention, the racism was even more obvious. As soon as she began to speak, her white opponent, seated onstage, took out her laptop and began to type. It was an extraordinarily rude and dismissive gesture designed to undermine not the points Fortson-Washington was making but the fact of her very presence; the likelihood that she had anything of value to say at all. Fortson-Washington had not done any such thing when her opponent had been speaking. Later, in the audience, a woman said audibly to her friend, ‘Just because she’s Black she thinks she would be a good leader?’ Another white woman complained about ‘this Black Lives Matter crap’. When it was time for questions, Fortson-Washington and Weeks were asked what white women were supposed to do if everyone was focusing on women of colour. [4](#)

It is not only NOW that has had problems with race. In July 2020, *The Lily*, the *Washington Post*’s feminist-oriented online magazine, published a report focusing on three major feminist organizations in America: NOW, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF). In interviews with twenty employees, they found a landscape where racism was rampant. Staffers of colour said that they were concentrated in the lower levels of the organization, with white leadership shaping organizational priorities that felt irrelevant to women who were not white, straight, cisgender, highly educated and upper-middle-class. The interviews found that ‘employees of color were often made to feel like “tokens” ... rolled out to show diversity but derided and dismissed within the confines of the office’. [5](#)

In June 2020, Toni Van Pelt, the NOW president who had demeaned China Fortson-Washington onstage, was removed after increasing allegations that she sidelined women of colour. The new president installed in her stead was Christian Nunes, a Black woman who had been serving as vice president. When asked in an earlier interview with the *Daily Beast* about whether her taking a leadership role had produced any changes, Nunes had said, ‘I thought that I was really going to be able to help this

organization. But ultimately I feel like I've just been a token.' She added that when she called out the racism at NOW, she was kept out of executive meetings, with her duties reassigned to white women. This sense of disillusionment had set in just one month after her appointment as vice president. [6](#)

The Feminist Majority Foundation, which notably supported the invasion of Afghanistan in order to 'save' Afghan women by occupying their country, has its own problems. Sherill Dingle, a Black woman who worked at FMF from 2017 to 2019, reported that when staffers brought up instances of racism, the president, Eleanor Smeal, would deflect by reminding everyone of her own participation in the Civil Rights Movement and the fact that she had marched with Coretta Scott King (the wife of Martin Luther King Jr).

Conversations about race, Dingle said, often turned into 'screaming matches'. Five other former staffers from FMF verified Dingle's statements. One of them, Shivani Desai, who had worked at FMF during the same period as Dingle, noted that Smeal had 'particularly volatile reactions to young, black women' and would pointedly try to highlight various oppressions experienced by white women, interjecting in conversations about women of colour by saying, 'and white women, too.' Smeal even complained about the 2016 exit polls that showed 53 per cent of white women had voted for Trump, claiming that number was 'fake'. [7](#)

Other actions taken by Smeal show a pointed disregard for her own white privilege. When the Trump administration implemented its 'zero tolerance' policy of separating children from their parents at the US-Mexico border, Smeal announced that FMF would take immediate action. In order to raise awareness, the staff of FMF would all get arrested and then released. She told her staff that she had already arranged with the police the conditions of their arrest and release. 'This makes absolutely no sense,' Dingle remembers telling Smeal and other members of staff about the plan, the likes of which she had never seen in her career in organizing. Dingle refused to attend the protest, feeling unsure that she, a Black woman, would be treated the same by the police as the white women. For this, she faced reprimands from her white manager, who said attending it was part of her job. 'They didn't know their privilege,' Dingle told *The Lily*. 'Do you really

think I can go to the police right now and say, “Hey I’m trying to do a march, I need to be arrested and let go.” Do you honestly think that would go well for me?’

In another conversation in which Dingle tried to explain the experience of Black women, Smeal insisted that white women also feel ‘powerless’ and ‘unable to speak up’, fearing they might be harmed because they are women. It was only later, when FMF was contacted for the *Lily* report, that they said, ‘We agree that Black women experience more oppression and discrimination than white women. Black women experience racism, white supremacy, sexism, patriarchy, and misogyny. White women experience sexism, patriarchy and misogyny.’ Even in their clarification they failed to understand that it was not a competition about relative oppressions, and nor did they recognize that white women always possess white privilege and Black women never do.

Meanwhile, at the AAUW, researcher Raina Nelson kept suggesting research initiatives around the challenges faced by women of colour. But Nelson’s proposals never went anywhere, as the organization chose to focus its major initiatives on issues most relevant to white women. It was particularly frustrating for Nelson to be a member of the research team and note just how much AAUW focused on initiatives such as salary-negotiation workshops, which are largely irrelevant to women who work minimum-wage jobs.

When Kimberly Churches, chief executive at AAUW, was contacted by *The Lily* about the organization’s failure to fund research around issues important to women of colour, she responded by forwarding two articles written by the association on issues affecting women of colour. One was three hundred words long, and the other (a blog post and not a research project) was seven hundred words.

The *Lily* report also discusses how the white leadership of the organizations, particularly NOW and FMF, tends to support each other against allegations of racist conduct. Since board members of both organizations tend to be white and older, many are friends and form their own cliques on boards. Eleanor Smeal and Teri Van Pelt (when she was still president of NOW), who are good friends, appeared at meetings together and backed each other’s ideas before staff.

It seems that not much has changed in the four decades since Audre Lorde excoriated the National Women's Studies Association for their blindness to the injustice imposed by race. 'I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action,' she said in 1981.⁸ Then, just as now, the white West was threatened by racial strife and the rise of rabid right-wing politics. The white women she spoke to considered themselves allies to Black women, just as many well-meaning white women do today. And like white women today, they were largely unconscious of the many injustices they inflicted on women of colour.

Lorde listed some that she had personally endured in her speech that day. There was the woman who came up to her and said, 'Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.' And the woman who, having just listened to Lorde read her poem about her anger, got up and said, 'Are you going to do anything with how can we deal directly with *our* anger?' And the time when the women's studies programme of a Southern university invited her to read following a week-long forum on Black and white women. 'What has this week given to you?' Lorde remembers asking the audience after the reading. At this: 'The most vocal white woman says, "I think I've gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I'm coming from." As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem.'

'This is a fight about narrative,' Kimberlé Crenshaw told Abigail Disney in an interview in June 2020.⁹ To create an egalitarian feminism excised of the dominating agendas of whiteness, all feminists – and particularly feminists of colour – must reshape the story of the movement so that the role whiteness, specifically white privilege, has played in its development is exposed for its toxicity. We must end the celebration of feminist 'heroes' who have propped up white supremacy, past and present, as we too prop it up by failing to speak out against them, by acting under racist assumptions or in complicity with racist practices and structures.

The first all-women-of-colour ticket for the presidency and vice presidency of NOW lost the election, but their candidacy did initiate an unmasking, exposing an internal culture of endemic racism. Tess Martin, a

Black woman, was an attendee at the conference. 'NOW's true face was very different,' she told reporters from the *Daily Beast*. 'Below the convenient lip service to sisterhood, it revealed itself to be the worst kind of clique, and the members are not women who look like me.' ¹⁰ Following the exposure of this deep-rooted prejudice, there was a mass exodus from the organization by those who disapproved of the way it had handled the issue of race. These were mostly women of colour, but also included some white women.

Both NOW and FMF are membership organizations whose membership is by and large white. The difficult work of feminist solidarity happens when this demographic fact is *not* used as an excuse to focus solely on issues facing middle-class white women and to map their concerns onto everyone else. Scores of feminists of colour, including myself, still believe that this is possible. It is not an elimination of white women from feminism; it is an elimination of 'whiteness' from feminism, in the sense that whiteness has been synonymous with domination and exploitation. And this goal can never be achieved without the support of white women.

The justice system is inaccessible to millions of people because of the economic inequalities baked into our capitalist economic model. And poverty, along with many related issues like job insecurity, housing insecurity, educational disadvantage and worse medical outcomes, disproportionately affects people of colour. If race and gender directly determine an individual's treatment in our society, so too does class. And I learned just how heavy the impact of class really was when I was a shiny new lawyer, just graduated from law school.

After I passed the Bar, the first job I took was as an associate attorney with a small African-American law firm, with a staff made up mostly of people of colour. The firm specialized in civil rights litigation, which included Title VII cases of employment discrimination and sexual harassment. Young and idealistic, I considered the content of the job (if not the pay) to be a dream. Not only was I working for a majority minority firm, but I would be helping those who had been discriminated against on racial or religious grounds. This kind of work was exactly what I had envisaged when I began training as a lawyer, years before.

The firm was tiny and there was no empty office for me, so they set me up in the library ready to receive clients, and the clients came. In one case, a young Hispanic woman employed in a local warehouse described how her co-workers would constantly make sexual comments, rub up against her and even try to pinch her breasts. In another case, a woman who worked stocking the shelves at a grocery store was being harassed by a fellow employee who kept making lewd comments when no one was around. In another, a white woman who worked at a convenience store described how she had been assaulted on the job by a co-worker who was off the clock.

I heard more of these stories than I can count. Each time, after writing down the details of the case, I would tell the client to expect a follow-up call confirming whether or not the firm could take her case. The next morning, I would meet with my supervising attorney to go over the facts. I soon discovered that it was not the client interviews but these post-briefing meetings with my supervisor that would dissipate my idealism. In our first terse chat, and many thereafter, the senior lawyer asked me: How much proof did she have? Did she know of others who had suffered similarly? Did her employer have a sexual harassment policy that was posted in a visible place, or in a handbook available to employees? Had she complained to a supervisor? Did she have a copy of that complaint? And, crucially, would she be able to pay costs?

If there was proof – a cell phone recording, a couple of co-workers willing to corroborate and testify to having heard or seen something, or, better still, to being harassed themselves – and if there was no sexual harassment policy or designated human resources officer, then things were looking good. If the complainant had the capacity to pay at least a little bit towards the legal costs, we would have a done deal.

But most of my clients could not pay, not even a little bit. And civil rights cases usually involve large costs, not only in terms of attorney time but also thousands of dollars to pay for transcripts of depositions and interviewing experts. There are costs associated with the filings themselves, costs associated with arranging video depositions in which the defendant can be questioned on the record, with the statements serving as proof admissible in court. Medical experts are also very expensive and often necessary – to prove, for example, the posttraumatic stress resultant from harassment and discrimination. Attorneys' fees themselves can theoretically be waived until

an outcome is reached, but the rest are upfront costs that require immediate cash.

The practice of contingency fees means plaintiffs do not have to pay until there is a payout from the defendant being sued, and the intention is to make sure that anyone, particularly those who do not have thousands of dollars lying around in their bank account, can afford to pursue justice. Our firm had a tight budget (the library in which I had my desk was where some clients ‘worked off’ their bills by filing and making copies), but we did in theory take cases on contingency. We would not reject clients because they could not pay these costs, but we would accept them a lot faster if they could.

That first woman’s case, the warehouse worker experiencing sexual harassment, was not, on the face of it, strong. The legal elements were all there, but there was little corroboration; she did not know of any harassment policy but I suspected one would be fished out when her employers heard of the complaint. When she returned a few days later, I had to give her bad news. There would be significant difficulties in pursuing the case and likely high costs involved. Would she be able to pay? The answer was no.

If race and gender directly determine an individual’s treatment in our society, so too does class. And the impact of class is further inflated if a person belongs to a racial minority. In the United States, 21 per cent of all Black people live below the poverty line, along with 17 per cent of Hispanic people and 24 per cent of Native Americans/Alaskan Natives. In contrast, only 9 per cent of white Americans live in poverty. ¹¹ And according to the Center for American Progress, women have higher rates of poverty than men across almost all races and ethnicities. ¹²

These numbers are important because they represent the extent of the problem. Research suggests that one of the primary reasons women of colour are unable to get out of poverty is the failure of economic redistribution mechanisms such as food stamps, welfare benefits and subsidized housing. ¹³ The importance of improving these increasingly neglected programmes cannot be emphasized enough; they must be restored and drastically accelerated if women of colour are to achieve parity.

Similar circumstances prevail in the United Kingdom. A decade of welfare cuts and austerity measures have meant that an estimated 14 million

people live in poverty, ¹⁴ and Black and Asian households in the lowest fifth of incomes have seen a 20 per cent decline in their living standards in that period of time, in comparison to a 17 per cent drop for white households in the same bracket. In all but one of the five sections of British households, poorest to richest, white families suffered least from the economic hardships of the 2010s. ¹⁵

These statistics illuminate one reason why pro bono and subsidized gender justice provisions are most often needed by women of colour – because they are the women most likely to be living in poverty. All this is before considering the ways in which workers in less-well-paid jobs, seen as lower status and more disposable, are much more vulnerable to becoming the target of harassment, abuse and mistreatment; and the ways in which this effect is amplified for women of colour, whose status and perceived value is further reduced by their failure to be white. At the same time, there are few ways for these women to access the justice system and have their claims heard. Even law firms that offer contingency fee agreements to their clients must look at the issue from an economic perspective, determining whether or not the investment of a lawyer's time along with all the other expenses is likely to yield a profit.

In the case of the Hispanic woman who worked at the warehouse, the upfront lack of evidence meant that a just outcome was not guaranteed in her case. But since the financial inability to have the case filed in the first place meant it would never come before a judge, never be heard or considered, a just outcome was absolutely impossible. And this is the situation for so many non-white women who face race-and gender-based discrimination; they do not have any recourse.

In her 2003 book with Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, critical theorist and political philosopher Nancy Fraser considers why redistribution is not usually included in discussions of oppression. Fraser focuses her attention on 'the widespread decoupling of cultural politics from social politics, of the politics of difference from the politics of equality'. Instead of simply taking 'recognition' to mean identity politics and 'redistribution' to mean class politics, Fraser describes a 'paradigm of redistribution [that] can encompass not only class-centered political

orientations, such as New Deal Liberalism, social democracy, and socialism, but also those forms of feminism and anti-racism that look to fairer economic relations to bring about racial and gender equity'. ¹⁶

As Fraser writes, one of the impediments to gender justice is the unfortunate distance between 'activist tendencies that look to redistribution as the remedy for male domination' and those that look 'to recognition of gender difference'. Politics that focus on identity-based groups like gender, sexuality, religion and race tend towards demanding recognition. But the reality of people's material conditions, though often correlated around identity groups, nonetheless varies widely within each group.

In Fraser's view, gender is a hybrid category in which women suffer from both under-recognition and maldistribution. Gender justice requires both recognition and redistribution. ¹⁷ A recognition-and-redistribution-based approach would insist, for instance, that workplaces and educational institutions make appropriate cultural or social accommodations for women of other racial groups, and then also ensure that they have access to financial assistance as individuals to help them pursue claims of discrimination. One literal iteration of this could be some form of free legal assistance for women of colour who face harassment or discrimination in the workplace, so that they have the ability to bring claims against their employer. Another could be priority adjudication at federal agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for women who face both race-and gender-based discrimination.

In her 1981 NWSA speech, Audre Lorde spoke to precisely this phenomenon: When an academic woman says, 'I can't afford it,' she may mean she is making a choice about how to spend her available money. But when a woman on welfare says, 'I can't afford it,' she means she is surviving on an amount of money that was barely subsistence in 1972, and she often does not have enough to eat. Yet the National Women's Studies Association here in 1981 holds a conference in which it commits itself to responding to racism, yet refuses to waive the registration fee for poor women and women of Color who wished to present and conduct workshops. This has made it impossible for many women of Color – for instance, Wilmette Brown, of Black Women for Wages for Housework – to participate in this conference. ¹⁸

A hundred anti-racist conferences will do little good if the people of colour they aim to empower cannot afford to be in the room.

Lorde's words come to mind when considering the Women's March in Washington, DC in January 2017. Almost half a million people attended that civil protest, the overwhelming majority of them white, middle-class women. Teresa Shook, the retired attorney who came up with the idea for the march, wrote later that 'the reality is that the women who initially started organizing were almost all white', and that she had initially called the event the Million Woman March, a name that had already been taken by a large protest held in Philadelphia by Black women in 1997. [19](#)

Aurielle Marie Lucier, writing in *Essence* magazine, talked about the racism she experienced at the march – from being pushed into a garbage can by a 'Nasty Woman' to being racially profiled by an elderly white feminist. She concluded that the white women had marched 'for themselves alone'. The emphasis on uteruses and pussies was also grating to Lucier, as it assumed that all women have them (thus excluding trans women). [20](#)

Lucier was just one of the Black women who spoke out. Research contrasting the atmosphere among organizers and commentators before and after the march shows how Black people who were critical of the march were shut down. One of them, Bridget Todd, had expressed fears that marginalized women would be subject to arrest and actions by the police simply because the white women who had not voted for Trump wanted to maximize the drama of the protest in order to make a point about their own outrage. 'I'm sorry white women, but some of you helped get us into this mess. Perhaps it isn't your voices that need to be amplified in the aftermath.' [21](#) Todd received a lot of pushback for daring to say this, most of it underscoring the colour-blind precept that the march was for 'all' women. She was accused of 'divisiveness, reverse racism and being angry with White women'. The war of rhetoric continued in the comments section of LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant's *New York Times* op-ed, 'Do Not Look for Me at the Women's March on Washington', where Ileana Simon wrote: 'You are a woman – and regardless of color, or ethnicity, or sexual orientation, we should be one voice.' [22](#)

This is just the sort of scolding that many women of colour are quite fed up of – its central mistake not dissimilar to the preachy colour blindness of

critics of the Black Lives Matter movement who are insistent that ‘All Lives Matter’. It ignores the simple truth that those who benefit from their skin colour cannot benignly preach colour blindness; it is just a screen for covering up their racial privilege.

The leaders of the Women’s March were proudly and publicly committed to an intersectional ideology, and yet they had not considered that Saturday, a day of rest for the middle class, was just another working day for those in the service and hospitality industries; for cleaners, transport workers, carers, and those engaged in many other kinds of low-paid and often insecure work usually performed by people of colour and immigrants. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that more than half of America’s ‘essential workers’ – including grocery store clerks, janitors and fast-food workers, generally paid minimum wage – are women, and of those women a disproportionate number are Black. ²³ Yet they were not seen as essential to the Women’s March three years earlier. So while many white women were exercising their right to peaceful protest on a day convenient to them, others – most likely women of colour and immigrants – cleaned their hotel rooms, bussed them around town, and cooked the tacos or noodles or pizza with which they rewarded themselves after a hard day protesting injustice.

Intersectional approaches are hard work, but they are possible. In the case of the Women’s March, a good strategy would have been to approach large corporations like Amazon, McDonald’s and Burger King, as well as major hotel chains, to allow their employees to have time off to attend the march. The fear of appearing anti-women could have been sufficient in many cases to ensure that women of colour had some opportunity to participate. The march could also have created better connections with the leadership of LGBTQIA+ organizations and groups like Black Lives Matter, so that they had a visible, agenda-setting role in the march.

Many of the white women who marched in 2017 wanted to show their political opposition to the election of Donald Trump – yet even while they claimed colour blindness as the gender agenda, they failed to acknowledge that for women of colour, the election of a president on a rising tide of white nationalism presented much more than an ideological affront: it was an actual threat. Even worse, they did not use the activism of that moment to acknowledge the role white women’s support for white supremacy had

played in that election, or to begin to combat it. The consequences of this hubris and apathy were clearly visible in the following presidential election: in 2020, the percentage of white women voting for Trump actually increased, to 55 per cent. Conversely, over 90 per cent of Black women – the highest percentage of any demographic – voted for Joe Biden. [24](#)

In subsequent years, the Women's March initiative has splintered into a number of separate organizations, each running its own demonstration on the anniversary of the original march. In 2020 there were questions about the continuing relevance of the march; some thought its goals, such as encouraging women to run for office, had already been accomplished. [25](#)

In the 2000s, when I first started volunteering with Amnesty International USA, they operated something called the 'own country rule' for country specialists. This meant I was forbidden from doing any work related to Pakistan because I was from Pakistan. And yet this rule, which applied to all the volunteers with some connection to a foreign country, did not extend to the white, American ones. The majority of my white American colleagues worked on issues related to the United States all the time. The 'gender' specialist worked on issues facing white women, but also extended herself to other countries whenever she wished.

The own country rule was a notable departure from the general emphasis which white institutions place on expertise as a qualification for all things. It actively flipped the qualification requirement, meaning that white people who were interested in working on a particular non-white country, but did not know the language or had never been to it, were treated as experts, while natives of those countries who had immigrated to the United States could not contribute their knowledge or even apply for the role. Later on, as the rule became harder to defend, it was alleged that it existed to protect the volunteer from reprisals in their country of origin. (Volunteers could easily have made such assessments of risk themselves, given that all volunteer work on human rights issues does involve some risk.) People of colour were thus being excluded from policy discussions for their own protection – and absolutely not, of course, to ensure that positions of influence were reserved for white workers despite them being the least knowledgeable people in the room.

In 2009, when I was elected to the board of Amnesty, the rule had, after much urging, been changed. However, there is an important distinction between what Nancy Fraser calls ‘affirmative change’ and actual transformational change. The former is perfunctory, form-filling, intended to silence and appease; the latter requires the dissolution of underlying structures and hierarchies for a complete reformulation. Whether it is the National Organization for Women, Amnesty International or even the Women’s March, all require transformational change. And this means reconsidering everything, from the way meetings are organized and conference calls are set up to the way public demonstrations are organized. But the go-to of most organizations, sadly, is instead to settle for affirmative change: the installing of a Black woman at the top, or the creation of a committee to look into ‘diversity’. (Amnesty International USA convened many of these, fostering the impression that something was being done, and taking months or sometimes years to reconfirm the findings which the previous committee had already made perfectly clear.) Feminism itself needs transformational change. The analysis of where and how to make this change must be intersectional, considering race and class and gender, and the redress must be both redistributive and recognitive. These are the demands of the moment, but none of them can be met without a revival of the collective and, most importantly, a return to the political.

One afternoon in the autumn of 2020, I had a discussion with an older white woman academic, about a topic which she considered terribly controversial and I not at all. The issue at hand was simple: during our conversation, I had confessed that I no longer used the three or four ‘waves’ of feminist analysis in my writing and speaking about feminism. That structure, I told her, represented a way of looking at history primarily through the lens of white Western women.

My colleague was aghast. In her mind, my rejection of this particular historical frame, which is a mainstay in gender studies courses all over the United States, was a precursor to turning all white women out of the feminist movement, even though they were not personally responsible or culpable for the wrongs of white feminists past – and even though they had, in her own words, ‘made the movement’.

Her words, or rather her anger, have stuck with me for a number of reasons. First, it is impossible for any change to occur unless white women,

particularly older white women, let go of their paranoid belief that racial equality within the movement is some sort of surreptitious strategy to displace them.

Second, if feminism is to be redeemed, time-worn colonialist ideas of history, tradition and contribution have to be transformed. White feminists who lay claim to having ‘made the movement’ are reflecting the structural privilege and power they have claimed at the expense of women of colour. And as Kimberlé Crenshaw says, ‘The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged.’ ²⁶ In order for any of these ideas to be of use to us, we need to face up to the environments in which they were generated. Creating a new narrative that is self-aware and unwilling to constantly repeat the injustices of the colonial past is essential in order to organize women around the idea of solidarity.

Third, white feminists must recognize and understand the distinction between whiteness, whose inequities have left such rot within the innards of the movement, and being a feminist who is white. The former creates hierarchies that further entrench the race-based inequities in society and enshrines white culture and white ways of eating, drinking, sleeping, speaking, communicating and organizing as *the* ways. The latter is a neutral demographic description of a person, unattached to an agenda of domination.

The difference is important; it refuses to allow white women to disengage from feminism under the pretext of being banished by an anti-white feminist agenda. When you are called out for white feminism, this is not a mere description of your racial heritage – something you may feel guilty about but can do nothing to change. It is a description of your words and actions.

It is crucial that white women realize that being white and a woman are not what makes a woman a white feminist; it is refusing to recognize white privilege. But they can, instead, eschew territoriality and let go of individual egoism, to help forge an authentically constructed solidarity.

Finally, white feminists must accept that true solidarity, where all races of women interact at a level of parity, means accommodating and valuing many different kinds of knowledge and expertise, first and foremost the

kind that comes from lived experience. Accomplishing equality will require lifting up women who are not slick with jargon or rhetoric, and venerating their contributions as much as those who know how to package themselves appealingly.

I began this book lamenting the evisceration of the political from feminism. ‘Empowerment’, as I pointed out in [Chapter 3](#), is a word that was coined by feminists from the Global South and which had collective political mobilization at its centre. ²⁷ Before its reduction to the mere economic process of handing out chickens or sewing machines or clean stoves, this idea of empowerment rested on three core components: power, conscientization and agency. In the defanged version of empowerment that exists today, each of these components has been redefined and repurposed: instead of power, women are given ‘livelihoods’; instead of conscientization of the structures of oppression, women are given leadership-skills training; and instead of meaningful agency, they are told to just lean in and push harder. ²⁸

The answer to reversing this situation of hollowed-out slogans and self-interested lone actors is solidarity. That is easy to prescribe but far more difficult to actually create. You might think that womanhood is a fairly powerful shared experience around which to build a collective, but it bears the taint of having meant specifically and only white womanhood since long before the moment Sojourner Truth asked, ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ and right up until the world we see today. Contemporary feminism is missing a clear political frontier that can attract women to it; it cannot exist simply as a force in search of an inchoate equality or the undefined eradication of patriarchy. We must unite behind specific political claims, and perhaps the most important of those claims is that the dominance of capitalism is bad for all women, even white women.

Anti-capitalist threads within feminism have historically been suppressed or inverted in order to protect the interests of white women, members of the richest race in the world. But the feminism that results – depoliticized, corporatized, atomized, affiliated with hollow consumerism or with violent domination – doesn’t even serve the interests of those white women in the long run.

When every woman is individually ‘leaning in’, there is no one left to build mutual aid and support. And so the focus for each woman is on conquering the system, just like white men have conquered it, rather than noticing the ways in which such conquest is structurally closed off to others around them. When you are pitted against an imagined ‘other’ to win a still-miserly crumb of power, you do not pool knowledge with that other, you do not communicate about your different experiences, and you never build up a cumulative picture of the deep faults in the system itself. You never reach the point of questioning its very existence.

This erosion of the collective impoverishes all women’s lives, stunting networks of support, slowing the progress of rights and redistribution campaigns, and wasting enormous amounts of energy within feminist ranks on the continual fight for some of our number to be heard even among ourselves.

Individualism, as the opposite of collective political consciousness, is a building block of capitalism. One task that Helen Gurley Brown accomplished with the creation of the Cosmo Girl was to transform women into individualist economic producers who could be installed in the capitalist machine and who would be sated by the things they could purchase with the money that they made, instead of by political progress. By the same token, capitalist forces have looked to depoliticize as many spheres of public life as possible. To create a feminist politics of solidarity, women have to recognize the forces that push them apart, goading them into meaningless competition in order to keep them from collective understanding and engagement. Individuality within the capitalist framework is an antidote to both politics and solidarity.

The past forty years have seen the persistence of a neo-liberal hegemony in all parts of public life. Around the world, people have been told that they have no choice but to accept the neo-liberal consensus, which in turn has eviscerated the idea that politics can and must have a transformative component. Before the rise of authoritarians like Trump in America, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Modi in India, politics seemed to have reached a point where there was no real difference anymore between the Right and the Left. Successive governments in both the United States and the United Kingdom effected very little difference in policy, in the grand scheme of things. It’s neatly summed up in Tony Blair’s famous claim that ‘The choice

is not between a left-wing economic policy and a right-wing one but between a good economic policy and a bad one.’ [29](#)

That incontrovertibly good economic policy, it turns out, was neo-liberalism. But when political questions are reduced to mere technical issues, whose outcomes and solutions can be determined with definitive correctness by experts, there is no space left for citizens to make choices about ideology. Several decades of unchallenged neo-liberalism have fostered a fear of the contentious and the political. At the same time, the NGO-ization of various political issues, such as the provision of services to women who undergo abuse or who need legal aid, has taken those issues out of the arena of political contention. Waves of government defunding that have directly impacted women are not even recognized as feminist issues. When money for a grant that provides legal services to women in domestic violence shelters is cut, it is difficult to even find out about it, so obscured are these decisions within layers of funding bodies and third parties, let alone to organize in resistance of those cuts. As with so many other formerly public goods, philanthropy unevenly tries to pick up the slack – but its priorities are shaped even more than those of government by the interests of white wealthy donors.

A reconstructed feminism must go beyond the installation of women of colour in key leadership positions in such charities. It must transform the very terms of leadership, to move away from technocratic, politically ‘neutral’ solutions and into the messy and vital arena of political contention. NGOs have a role to play in society, but the technocratic NGO-ization of the political space has left too many – particularly feminists of colour – disenfranchised, because they are systematically closed out from influencing the agendas of these organizations, which distribute power and resources in unregulated, uneven ways.

When everything is feminist, nothing is feminist. The we-can-all-agree-on-this brand of choice feminism has not only proven impotent, it has eluded accountability. After all, if everyone is responsible for ensuring an education for all girls, then no one is. This lack of accountability is why feminism has been reduced to a branding mechanism rather than a force for real change.

But giving feminism political meaning must not be conflated with exclusion. The definition of a feminist frontier as a line of political action and organization means that there will be women who fall outside it. But they will be women who disagree with its aims, as is their right, and not those who want to participate but find themselves in a devalued and persecuted identity category. The women who fall outside the group are not excluded in the sense of being dismissed or ignored, but rather, for their own reasons, will make the political choice not to align themselves with the politics of feminism. To stand for something inherently means that some will choose not to stand with you. This is essential for the constitution of a movement, not a harbinger of its inadequacy.

Conclusion: On Fear and Futures

As I neared the end of writing this book, I was overcome with an acute sense of foreboding. Separating women into white women and women of colour means that many of those who I love and respect – friends, colleagues and family members – could read my words as an indictment of them as ‘white women’. I realize that this is both a reflection of our riven society and of the raw emotional contours that discussions of race incite in all of us. Acknowledging this as the reality is the first step in considering how we move beyond calling each other out and progress to a conversation that is urgent and necessary. If the Trump era has weaponized racial divisions to end conversation, my hope is to normalize the discussions so that we can move past being reactive and closer to being transformative.

Towards this end, I have tried to construct an argument here for the possibility of seeing the world through the eyes of other women. This is an individual and collective challenge, and we must start from the understanding that this challenge is one that women of colour have been undertaking for centuries, and not out of any great compassion or racially inherent caring quality, but out of the need to survive in a white-run world. It is time now for white women to meet them in this work and share the burden.

We must also realize, though, that framing each other in the language of racial difference bears within it the possibility of turning away, of relinquishing others we have known and respected and loved because they belong to the category of white woman or woman of colour. White women who have spent their lives arguing and working to uplift the voices of women of colour can feel as if they are being unjustly lumped in with those who have racist views. Similarly, non-white women can fall prey to over-interpretation or to ascribing racist motives even to overtures that are sincerely born of a desire for mutual understanding. I acknowledge these

pitfalls because I have encountered and experienced them and also because I ardently hope that we, as women and as feminists, can get beyond them. I think it is crucial that discussions of white feminism not be understood as an indictment of all white women, nor a prescription to discard working across difference because racial difference makes mutual understanding impossible.

Writing this book has been instructive for me personally as to the emotional mechanics of race: the struggle to distinguish between what is genuinely part of the scaffolding of systemic racism and what is a reaction that results from the trauma of exclusion. If white women must see beyond their own actions as individuals and recognize the power and privilege of the category that they inhabit, feminists of colour must also reject the temptation to pathologize every flawed interaction. It is easy to be immersed in the paranoia that no sincere solidarity is possible and retreat to our own racial categories; it is much harder to relinquish the sense of being wronged and work towards coming together. I am hoping we can do this.

Critique is the first step in a long process of opening the debate. Arguing for reinvigorating the possibility of political contestation and confrontation necessitates that the ideas in this book be challenged and argued, and be accepted or rejected without any interlocutors fearing being labelled as racist simply because they do not find them convincing or because they see alternative possibilities beyond the ones that are suggested here. It is my hope that in inviting this sort of critique and opening my own work to it that I can model its necessity. The history of systemic racism within feminism, some of which I have attempted to outline here, should not be a dead end to debate and contestation within feminism. White women must not feel that the critique of whiteness within feminism is some crude intimidation tactic meant to silence them altogether. Non-white women should avoid using critique as self-defence against having their ideas and arguments challenged by feminists of any colour, and nor should they deploy it as a panacea against self-examination. If feminism and the feminist project are to be taken seriously in this moment of cultural transformation, this is absolutely essential.

This book is an argument for feminism to pitch itself against a very specific frontier, that of whiteness, where whiteness is not construed as a biological category but as a set of practices and ideas that have emerged

from the bedrock of white supremacy – itself the legacy of empire and slavery. At the moment, that frontier cuts directly down the middle of feminism, making a true unified ‘we’ of womanhood impossible, in part because we are unwilling to discuss and confront what whiteness has done to feminism, and what it has stolen from it. But it can be cast out – through vocal and visible upheaval of structures of power. We must abandon the appendage style of inclusion which assumes that the addition of one woman of colour to your panel or your curriculum or your committee is enough. We must denounce those who continue to cling to exclusionary histories, stories and forms, even in the name of tradition. And the feminists who have too long used the privilege of whiteness to imagine a trickle-down feminism, its parameters defined from the top, must give way to feminists committed to punching up and dismantling the establishment.

Feminists today face the great challenge of transformation: an embrace of the adversarial while knowing that adversaries are not enemies; an embrace of community that does not require endless compromises from those with the least power; and a realism that accepts women as they are and where they are today. Prescient as ever, Audre Lorde knew this crisis that would confront us, the women of the future, when she wrote: ‘Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.’ ¹

When I look around me today, I see too many women of colour turning away from feminism. In some cases, they are saying goodbye to mainstream white feminism in order to build more specialized movements: Muslim feminisms, Black feminisms, queer feminisms. These smaller groups have a powerful role to play but we also need to create a space where different tribes can work together on issues that affect us all – and, vitally, where they can lend one another equally ardent support for issues that do not affect us all. Communities must remain free to form their own specialized groups, but that need not reduce their capacity or potential for coming together to create a potent and transformative mainstream feminist politics.

No movement that is unable to do justice among its own adherents is likely to accomplish any wider goals towards justice. This book has attempted to see clearly the different dimensions of the feminist movement as it exists today, how it has arrived at this point and where it could go from here, such that every woman who calls herself a feminist – of any race, class, nationality or religion – can see a path forward and a reason to stay.

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Introduction: At a Wine Bar, a Group of Feminists

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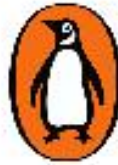
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