

# Me, not you

The trouble with  
mainstream feminism

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# Introduction

In November 2017 the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, representing 700,000 female farmworkers and women in farmworker families across the US, wrote a letter of solidarity to the Hollywood women at the centre of #MeToo. 'We do not work under bright stage lights or on the big screen', the letter said. 'We work in the shadows of society in isolated fields and packinghouses that are out of sight and out of mind.' Nevertheless, it continued, 'we believe and stand with you'. The question left unasked, taken up in discussions in the days that followed, was 'will you believe and stand with *us*?'

This question inspired the Time's Up initiative, a legal defence fund to help women in all industries fight sexual harassment. The first meeting was held at the home of actor Jessica Chastain – other white actors involved included Reese Witherspoon, Natalie Portman, Nicole Kidman, Amber Tamblyn, Jennifer Aniston and Margot Robbie. But women of colour were also at the forefront from the start. The founders of Time's Up included National Women's Law Center

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president Fatima Goss Graves, producer Shonda Rhimes, actors Rashida Jones, America Ferrara, Eva Longoria, Lena Waithe and Kerry Washington, and director Ava DuVernay. Its first CEO was the former Atlanta city councilwoman and WNBA president Lisa Borders. In 2018 Time's Up awarded \$750,000 in grants to 18 organisations across the US supporting low-wage workers.

The profile of women of colour in such a mainstream initiative made Time's Up a departure from the norm. Nevertheless, it was criticised for being an 'exclusive club' and concentrating too much on white celebrities. It was also accused of using activists of colour as window dressing: for instance, at the 2018 Golden Globes, when eight white Hollywood stars each took an activist (including #MeToo founder Tarana Burke and Alianza Nacional de Campesinas president Mónica Ramírez) as their 'plus ones'. Time's Up occupies a complex position in a feminist mainstream dominated by white and privileged women. Even when women of colour are in leadership roles, the pull of whiteness is strong.

This is the trouble with mainstream feminism, encapsulated in the title of my book: 'Me, Not You'. This is, of course, a play on #MeToo. The #MeToo movement, started as a programme of work by Black feminist and civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, went viral as a hashtag eleven years later after a tweet by white actor Alyssa Milano. And mainstream movements such as #MeToo have often built on and



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co-opted the work of women of colour, while refusing to learn from them or centre their concerns. Far too often the message is not 'Me, Too' but 'Me, Not You'. And, as I will write, this is not just a lack of solidarity. Privileged white women also sacrifice more marginalised people to achieve our aims, or even define them as enemies when they get in our way.

#MeToo is a movement about sexual violence, most of which is perpetrated by cisgender men. This book is also about violence – especially the violence we can do in the name of fighting sexual violence. When I say 'we', I mainly mean white women and white feminists. This book is addressed to my fellow white feminists; although it is dedicated to Black feminists, they will not need to read it.<sup>1</sup> For feminists of colour, the arguments I make here will probably be nothing new (and I hope this book will help ease the burden of constantly having to explain whiteness to white women).<sup>2</sup>

The 'Me' in the book's title also refers to me, a white feminist writing about white feminism. Some of the views I write about I have previously held; some of the dynamics I write about I have participated in myself (and might again in future, despite my best intentions). I am ambivalent about writing about whiteness: I am concerned, as some readers might also be, that in critiquing whiteness from within, I am trying to absolve myself of my own. I am worried that I am trying to be one of the 'good white people', who perform what feminist scholar Sara Ahmed calls a 'whiteness that is anxious about itself' and see that as anti-racist action.<sup>3</sup>

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And deep down, that might be the case. Whiteness is wily: white supremacy is so embedded in our psyches that we end up doing it even while we claim (and believe) it is what we oppose. You are entitled – even invited – to make up your own minds about my motivations. But regardless of why you think I have written it, I hope you find something in this book of value. And if not, I am happy to be told I am wrong: knowledge is always partial, and we learn through dialogue with one another.

My analysis of mainstream feminism comes from fifteen years of research on, and activism around, sexual violence.<sup>4</sup> I am a white academic in this field, with all the privileges that entails. But my experience of it has been ambivalent and complex. I experience class anxiety in academia. My politics tend to differ from those of many other scholars and activists in my area, as well as (in other ways) from those of my family of origin. I am what Sara Ahmed would call a ‘willful child’: I do not fit in.<sup>5</sup> I am also a queer woman with non-paradigm experiences of sexual trauma. To understand all these things, I have repeatedly turned to the words and actions of Black feminists and other feminists of colour, trans women and sex workers (and women who fit two or more of these categories). Their ideas are what Ahmed would call my feminist bricks – it has been my privilege to spread some mortar between them.<sup>6</sup>

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### What is 'mainstream feminism'?

This is a book about mainstream feminism. And by this, I mean mostly Anglo-American public feminism. This includes media feminism (and some forms of social media feminism) or what media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser has called 'popular feminism': the feminist ideas and politics that circulate on mainstream platforms.<sup>7</sup> It also includes institutional feminism, corporate feminism and policy feminism: the feminism that tends to dominate in universities, government bodies, private companies and international NGOs. This is not a cohesive and unified movement, but it has clear directions and effects. In other texts, it has been called 'neoliberal feminism', 'lean-in' feminism and 'feminism for the 1%'.<sup>8</sup> This is because it wants power *within* the existing system, rather than an end to the status quo.

Mainstream feminism, exemplified by campaigns such as #MeToo, tends to set the agenda for parliamentary politics, institutional reform and corporate equality work. It tends to be highly visible internationally, because Western media forms are dominant across the globe. This profile and influence are the reasons why it is important to critique. But this mainstream movement is by no means the whole of feminist politics. I am aware that defining 'feminism' as white and privileged risks (re)constituting it as such, and I do not want to erase the fundamental contributions of feminists of colour. A founding assumption of this book is that the

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mainstream Anglo-American movement is often taken to represent feminism, when in fact it does not.

White and privileged women dominate mainstream feminism. These demographics shape the movement's politics, but are perhaps partially hidden by monikers such as 'neoliberal feminism', 'popular feminism' and the rest. In contrast, this book centres race, giving an additional reading of the movement at a time when white supremacy is being violently reasserted. There is already increasing discussion of 'white feminism', used to denote a feminism that ignores the ideas and struggles of women of colour. This book is based on the concept of *political whiteness*, which describes a set of values, orientations and behaviours that go deeper than that. These include narcissism, alertness to threat and an accompanying will to power. And perhaps most crucially, they characterise mainstream feminism *and* other politics dominated by privileged white people. They link movements such as #MeToo with the backlashes against them. And they link more reactionary forms of white feminism with the far right.


Political whiteness tends to be visibly enacted by privileged white people (but can cross class boundaries), and can also be enacted by people of colour because it describes a relationship to white supremacist systems rather than an identity *per se*. It is produced by the interaction between supremacy and victimhood: the latter includes the genuine victimisation at the centre of #MeToo and similar movements, and the imagined




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victimhood of misogynist, racist and other reactionary politics. I am not denying that mainstream feminism is rooted in real experiences of oppression and trauma. I am not saying that these experiences do not deserve to be taken seriously. But I am asking: how are these experiences politicised, and what do they do?

### Sexual violence in the intersections



My analysis of mainstream feminism is grounded in the principle of intersectionality. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and other Black feminist scholars, this refers to the complex relationships that make up our social world<sup>9</sup> – relationships between categories such as race, class and gender, and between the associated oppressions of racism, classism and sexism. These are produced by intersecting systems: heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism.



Patriarchy refers to the domination of women by men. This pre-dates capitalism (at least in the West), but capitalism embedded it by separating production and reproduction and making women responsible for the latter. Capitalism relies on social reproduction – creation of and care for human life – but doesn't want to foot the bill. Historically, white bourgeois homemakers were confined, unpaid, to the private sphere. Working women have been (and are) over-represented in the low-status and low-paid caring professions which also reproduce human life. And even if they are family breadwinners, women perform the bulk of domestic

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labour with little or no help from capital. Because we are seen as hardwired to care, as sociologist Maria Mies argues, our labour is exploited as if it is a 'natural' resource.<sup>10</sup> Women's work is not viewed as real work: it exists in the realm of 'love', not money. This is how capitalist patriarchy constructs gender.

Capitalist patriarchy is heteropatriarchy: it relies on the heterosexual nuclear family as an economic and reproductive unit. And as capitalism began to expand from the fifteenth century onwards, European colonialism and settler-colonialism exported this model of social organisation into most of the world. Common lands were subdivided into family plots; colonised people were defined as 'less-than-human' because they did not conform to the bourgeois nuclear family and its gendered separation of roles. Capitalism also was and is racial capitalism. It is built on the appropriation of Indigenous lands, enslavement of populations, and the ongoing exploitation of people of colour (women especially) as 'expendable' units of production and both biological and social reproduction.<sup>11</sup>

Racial capitalism does not just create inequality based on categories such as class, race, gender, disability, age and nation – it *relies* on it. To maintain a stratified system, to ensure that the economically privileged can monopolise resources, some people must be relegated to marginalised economic or reproductive roles. Others must be placed outside the system completely – stripped of their humanity, to be dispossessed and eventually done away with.

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Violence against women is a pivot for the intersecting systems of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism. It results from the tussle for material and emotional resources, between commodity production and the reproduction of human life. Men's domination of women, essential to social reproduction, is achieved through violence and the threat of it: at home, in the workplace and on the streets. Racial capitalist development relied on forced reproduction via the rape of enslaved women, and coerced reproduction via the expectation that women in general would create and care for the workforce.<sup>12</sup> The 'primitive accumulation' of racial capitalism violently dispossessed women of land, resources and power to put them under men's control, making them more vulnerable to violence (and this continues in neo-colonial contexts).<sup>13</sup> Sexual violence is a form of terrorism that supports economic expansion. It kept (and keeps) conquered, enslaved and dispossessed populations in line.

But terror can also be generated through maiming and killing men of colour and impoverished white men accused of raping bourgeois white women. And it is this fact that mainstream feminist movements tend to minimise or forget. In colonial Australia, rape was a 'violation of female purity' punishable by death – politicians insisted that this was necessary to keep both Indigenous men and 'disreputable' white men under control. The story of the 'white woman of Gippsland', said to have been held against her will by Kurnai people in the 1840s, justified further brutalisation and

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dispossession of Indigenous Australian communities that had already been brutalised and dispossessed.<sup>14</sup> Following Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, white Americans used lynchings to terrorise and control free Black people. Rape of a white woman was one of the most common pretexts. And murder could escalate to massacre. In 1921 between 100 and 300 Black people in Greenwood, Tulsa, were killed by white mobs in a matter of hours after a Black man was falsely accused of raping a white woman in an elevator.<sup>15</sup>

A key premise of this book is that acts, threats *and allegations* of sexual violence are all tools of oppression. Sexual violence is terror; so is the way it is tackled and policed. And (white) 'women's safety' is used to justify violence against marginalised communities. This is a challenge for mainstream feminist movements against sexual violence, which are dominated by bourgeois white women.

This leads to the other key premise of this book: being a victim and being a perpetrator are not mutually exclusive. Bourgeois white women can be victims of sexual violence, but we are also perpetrators of race and class supremacy. Supremacy is expressed in the 'care chains' through which we exploit poorer women, often migrants and women of colour, to do the labour of social reproduction while we do more lucrative work. And it is expressed in the violence done in the name of 'protecting' us from violence, legitimating the hyper-exploitation and genocide of communities of colour.



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White women's 'protection' is also at the forefront in a world moving rapidly to the right. 'White power', in the form of ideological fascism, border regimes and hoarding of resources, is being reasserted in response to economic and ecological crisis. And the difficult and painful questions this raises for mainstream feminism are at the heart of this book. While I do not hope or pretend to answer all of them, I hope this text might be a companion for other white women who, like me, are interested in doing their feminism differently. If that is you, please read on.

## Chapter 1

# Gender in a right-moving world

The cover of *Time* magazine on 15 October 2018 was an illustration of Dr Christine Blasey Ford.<sup>1</sup> Artist John Mavroudis created it, using phrases from Ford's testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the US Supreme Court. These phrases were arranged into a striking image of Ford taking the oath. On her forehead is written 'seared into my memory'. This is how she described her experience, at the age of 15, of sexual assault by Justice Kavanaugh. It had happened, Ford said, at a small gathering of young people in the Bethesda/Chevy Chase area of Maryland. In an upstairs bedroom, Kavanaugh had climbed on top of her and tried to remove her clothes. She tried to yell for help. When she did, he put his hand over her mouth. 'This was what terrified me the most,' she said, 'and has had the most lasting impact on my life. It was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that Brett was accidentally going to kill me.'

In front of a panel of eleven Republicans (all men) and ten Democrats (mostly men), Ford recounted how the

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assault had drastically altered her life. While remodeling the house she shared with her husband she had insisted on a second front door – a potential escape route. As she had explained why she needed one, she had described the assault to her husband in detail. She recalled saying at the time that ‘the boy who assaulted me could someday be on the U.S. Supreme Court’. As a survivor of sexual violence, this phrase rings in my ears: it represents the right of powerful men to abuse women with impunity.

It was also clear, during the hearings, that impunity was what Kavanaugh and his supporters expected. His demeanour during his testimony was widely contrasted with Ford’s – an image, circulated on social media, showed him snarling as he shouted into a microphone. He shouted a lot, in a long and irate speech in which he called the process a ‘national disgrace’ and a ‘grotesque and coordinated character assassination’ fuelled by ‘anger about President Trump’ and ‘revenge on behalf of the Clintons’. He seemed like a man accustomed to getting his way.

And get it he did. Brett Kavanaugh was eventually confirmed as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, after a perfunctory delay. But Christine Blasey Ford’s actions inspired an international wave of support. The hashtag #WhyIDidntReport trended on social media. Tarana Burke and other leaders of #MeToo published an open letter of solidarity, and another one was signed by more than 200 alumnae of Ford’s high school. Ford was nominated for the John F. Kennedy

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Profile in Courage Award, named ‘person of the year’ by the anti-sexual-violence group Raliance, and short-listed for person of the year by *Time*.

Ford was also compared to Professor Anita Hill, whose 1991 testimony during Justice Clarence Thomas’s Supreme Court nomination hearings sparked a national discussion about sexual harassment. Hill accused Justice Thomas of repeatedly making unwanted advances towards her when she was his employee, first at the Education Department and later at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. She also said he would often talk about sex in detail at work, describing pornography he had watched involving bestiality and rape. Like Ford’s, Hill’s testimony inspired a generation of women and survivors. In her autobiography *Speaking Truth to Power*, she wrote: ‘To my supporters I represent the courage to come forward and disclose a painful truth – a courage which thousands of others have found since the hearing.’<sup>2</sup>

But the comparison between Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford can only go so far. Hill, a Black woman, had a much frostier reception than Ford did: even the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) announced that it would oppose Thomas’s nomination ‘with regret’ (Thomas is also Black).<sup>3</sup> Hill was questioned by a group consisting entirely of white men. In an interview at Stanford University eleven years later, she wondered how those men, and others, might have reacted if she had been ‘white, blond-haired and blue-eyed’.<sup>4</sup> That question was

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at least partially answered by the reaction to Christine Blasey Ford. Even Donald Trump called Ford a 'fine woman' and 'very credible witness' (before mocking her at a rally in Mississippi).

Hill's experience reflects what Moya Bailey and Trudy call 'misogynoir'.<sup>5</sup> This is the blend of sexism and racism that shapes Black women's experiences and led Kimberlé Crenshaw to coin the term 'intersectionality'. The stereotype of the violent Black man, which means that men of colour are usually treated harshly, was weaponised in this case by Thomas. He famously called himself the victim of a 'high-tech lynching'. And in order to exonerate him, Hill was painted as a 'Jezebel' who had asked for what she got.

More than 1,600 Black women signed the Sisters Testify proclamation protesting the treatment of Hill. This was organised by African American Women in Defense of Ourselves, and printed as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Throughout US history, it said, Black women had been sexually stereotyped as 'immoral, insatiable, perverse; the initiators in all sexual contacts, abusive or otherwise'. These stereotypes – rooted in colonialism, in slavery, in segregation – created the idea that Black women could not be sexually assaulted.<sup>6</sup> 'As Anita Hill's experience demonstrates,' the proclamation said, 'Black women who speak of these matters are not likely to be believed.'

There is a gap of twenty-seven years between the allegations made by Professor Anita Hill and Dr Christine

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Blasey Ford. This may also be a factor. Commenting on Ford's allegations in a speech to tech employees in Houston, Hill remarked that a generation of women had taken Gender Studies since her own testimony, and that there were also more female journalists and more women coming forward with stories of abuse.<sup>7</sup> Hill's own part in these cultural shifts should not be underestimated. Like many Black women before and after her, she played a pivotal role in putting a key feminist issue on the agenda.

## The war on women

In a *New York Times* article on Hill's Houston speech, Clifford Krauss remarked that Hill's and Ford's testimonies 'bookended' an era in which the public had 'increasingly come to grips with the issues of sexual harassment and assault'. The testimonies also mark early and late stages of neoliberal capitalism, with its production of huge inequalities and insecurities, including ones related to gender. Neoliberalism puts the needs of the market above all else. It also creates market solutions for social problems – and as public sectors have shrunk, women's private burdens have grown. As capitalism has spread to new territories, women have been exploited and dispossessed. As all this has happened and more, the rhetoric of 'development' and 'choice' has hidden gender and other inequalities.<sup>8</sup>

There are profound connections between capital accumulation and violence against women. As scholar

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and activist Sylvia Federici writes, capitalist development began with a war on women: the European witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which destroyed the female subjects, practices and knowledges (especially of abortion and female sexuality) standing in the way of capital.<sup>9</sup> These persecutions helped get all women under male control, confining many in the private sphere as unpaid agents of social reproduction. Gender was embedded in the bourgeois nuclear family unit (exemplified in the 'family wage' paid to men in later versions of the capitalist system).<sup>10</sup> Men were also allowed to punish women's refusal of domestic work, protected by the right to privacy which still enables domestic violence.

Federici also identifies a new war on women being waged right now. This involves rising violence, femicide and attacks on reproductive rights, happening especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. Today, capitalism is not spread by imperial armies but by the private armies and security guards of mining and petroleum companies, sanctioned by bodies such as the UN and the World Bank. And similar to the other forms of colonialism that preceded it, this has also involved land grabs, the destruction of traditional communities and relations, and hyper-exploitation of women's bodies and labour. Globalisation, Federici writes, 'is a process of political recolonization intended to give capital uncontested control over the world's natural wealth and human labor, and this cannot be achieved without attacking

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women, who are directly responsible for the reproduction of their communities'.<sup>11</sup>

In India and other countries, women have been forced to give up subsistence production and assist their husbands' commodity production instead. Women labour in agricultural fields and maquiladoras/sweatshops, which are often unregulated and in which sexual harassment and violence are rife. Or they find work as migrants in sectors with few rights and protections, such as domestic work or the sex industry. Underground economies intensify, together with strategies to combat organised crime (which, in turn, exacerbate poverty), putting women at risk. Women have been sexually violated, tortured and murdered by both 'narcos' and security forces in Mexico's war on drugs.

The war on women is also being waged in the neoliberal West. We are living in what, drawing on sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya, I will describe as a *capitalism of limit*: the engines of accumulation are stuttering because of economic and ecological crisis.<sup>12</sup> As political scientist Nancy Fraser writes, this has also produced a crisis of social reproduction, as the state withdraws from welfare commitments and capitalism 'eats its own tail'.<sup>13</sup> And recession following the 2008 financial crisis has justified austerity policies to protect markets through further downsizing, removing or selling off social supports, which has widened gaps between rich and poor (as well as providing opportunities for the disaster capitalism that profits from economic crisis and shifts public goods into private hands). Women



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and children have borne the brunt of cuts, which have also been especially vicious for elderly people and/or people with disabilities.

As their caring burdens have grown, women (especially women of colour) have been pushed out of shrinking and increasingly automated labour markets. Women are the majority of the global proletariat in precarious, informal and 'gig' economy jobs or state-sanctioned 'welfare to work' programmes, picked up and then put down as capitalism requires and then rejects them. And when inequalities increase, so do domestic and sexual violence. In crisis economies with few social supports, men vent their frustrations on the women in their families who are expected to provide care with almost no resources. Financial pressures stop women leaving abusive relationships. And services for women disappear: in the UK, austerity budgets have caused one in four women's refuges to lose all government funding.<sup>14</sup>

Economic, social and ecological crisis has also helped catalyse the global swing to the right, in which marginalised groups have been blamed for scarcity and other problems not of their making. In a capitalism of limit, there is an intensified focus on protecting the global 'haves' from the 'have nots'. As more privileged people feel the material and existential anxiety that has long been a fact of life for everyone else, Others are (re)defined as surplus to requirement or as threats. The 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK captured growing (or perhaps increasingly explicit) anti-immigrant

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sentiment. Similar currents propelled Donald Trump into the US presidency later that same year. Proto-fascist leaders have been elected (or re-elected) in other countries including Hungary, India, the Philippines and Brazil. Far-right parties are making inroads in parliaments across Europe and overseas, often supported by 'dark money' from Russia and/or the US Christian right.<sup>15</sup>

Hoarding and defending resources means reasserting borders. It also means reasserting white supremacy, class privilege, 'abled' bodies, masculinity and binary gender. Women are women and men are men; Brexit means Brexit. Philosopher Maria Lugones writes that while colonial capitalism imposed the ideology of heteropatriarchy, it invented the ideology of race to control land, production and behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Although notions of race have a longer history, colonialism systematically 'raced' populations so they could be hyper-exploited, and eventually discarded, by capitalist production. Populations were also systematically gendered to facilitate this process: women were subordinated to men and made solely responsible for social reproduction, and there were attempts to eradicate Indigenous genders that did not fit the Western binary.

Echoing the historical colonial project, contemporary far-right politics blends racism with attacks on feminists and LGBT (especially trans) people. In 2018 the white supremacist Donald Trump declared his intention to 'legislate transgender out of existence' through changing the Title IX amendment to

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the Higher Education Act to define gender as determined by biological sex, and biological sex as immutable and determined by genitalia at birth. Also in 2018 Jair Bolsonaro was elected the 38th president of Brazil. In early 2019 he signed an executive order opening up Indigenous reserves to mining. In 2015 he had said: 'The Indians do not speak our language, they do not have money, they do not have culture. They are native peoples. How did they manage to get 13 per cent of the national territory?'<sup>17</sup> Bolsonaro is also a misogynist and 'proud homophobe' who has said he would be 'incapable of loving' a gay son.

## The war on 'gender ideology'

Bolsonaro's election platform positioned him as a key player in the ongoing war on 'gender ideology' being fought across the religious and extreme right. This war started in the 1990s, declared by the Vatican when gender began to enter the lexicon of the United Nations and other global institutions. Its key tactics are opposing women's rights (including, centrally, abortion); defending heterosexuality and the nuclear family; and opposing the substitution of the biological language of 'sex' with the social and cultural term 'gender'.

In 2019 the Vatican published a document entitled 'Male and Female He Created Them', circulated to Catholic schools across the world. This aimed to counter ideas that denied 'the natural difference between a man and a woman', claiming that gender theory

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intended to create a 'cultural and ideological revolution'. The insinuations of communism here are not accidental. In ex-Soviet countries, 'gender ideology' is often compared to, or associated with, Stalinist indoctrination. Feminism and other progressive movements are also frequently called 'Stalinist' on the Western political right.

Schools and universities are central battlegrounds for the war against 'gender ideology'. Education is seen as the nerve centre for indoctrination into progressive politics and/or LGBT identities. Bolsonaro has backed the Schools Without Political Parties campaign, which aims to crack down on left-leaning views and the use of the terms 'gender' and 'sexual orientation' in classrooms. And university Gender Studies programmes, which are often female dominated, are imagined as gender ideology's headquarters. Religious and far-right politicians and groups have consistently attempted to discredit this academic field by suggesting that it is unscientific and that its scholars are agents of an agenda to destroy the nuclear family, heterosexuality and traditional gender roles (which we are).

In 2018 Hungary's proto-fascist government banned Gender Studies on the grounds that it was an 'ideology not a science'. 'People are born either male or female', said a spokesman, 'and we do not consider it acceptable for us to talk about socially constructed genders.' Alternative for Germany (AfD), the first far-right party to enter the German Bundestag since the Second World War, has pledged to discontinue all Gender Studies

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funding, university appointments and research.<sup>18</sup> And Gender Studies is the canary in the coalmine. It is the first casualty of right-wing strategies to undermine all progressive politics and thought. In 2019 Bolsonaro announced plans to end government funding of philosophy and sociology degrees: these subjects tend to house gender scholars, but this was also a broadening of the offensive.

Gender Studies is seen as the apex of what is scornfully called 'identity politics', which acts as a cipher for the resentments of those who feel equality has gotten out of hand. From being a fairly neutral description of struggles around issues such as gender, class and race, 'identity politics' has become a pejorative. The term is now used on the right (and by some on the left) to connote politics focused on difference and division, and grounded in grievances and parochial concerns. Critiques of 'identity politics' also have more liberal formulations couched in defence of 'Enlightenment values' such as individualism and science, or 'free speech' and exchange of ideas.

In contrast to identity politics, the politics of white men is seen as representing universal, and reasonable, concerns. It is claimed that these concerns are ignored or dismissed by 'identity politics' ideologues who cannot cope with critical thought. On the right, a 'reasonable' idea could be that there are two immutable, biological sexes and that you cannot change from one to the other. Or that variations in IQ are at least partially attributable to race. Or that perhaps people

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with disabilities would prefer to be sterilised ‘for their own good’. Defences of such ideas, and complaints that their proponents are being silenced, are now made from high-profile platforms and to growing audiences. This is a bait and switch by which beliefs that have been dominant for centuries are repackaged and return as the telling of radical new truths.

‘Identity politics’ ideologues (also known as feminists, anti-racists, LGBT and disability rights activists and others) insist that instead of having a ‘civilised debate’ about these ideas, we should call them the discredited and reactionary nonsense they are. Because of this, we are defined as censorious and oppressive. As the far-right outlet *Breitbart* proclaimed on Facebook during Trump’s election campaign: ‘Liberal students are precious snowflakes whose ideas must never be challenged. They must forever be coddled and their tender feelings protected, as they are social justice warriors in training whom you will continue funding with your tax dollars.’

In 2017 the *Telegraph* newspaper in the UK claimed that Cambridge University student Lola Olufemi had forced her university to ‘drop white authors’ from its syllabus. In fact, Olufemi had merely made recommendations for including more authors of colour. And despite there being very little evidence of speakers being ‘no platformed’ in UK universities, in 2017 the Conservative government suggested that universities might be fined for excluding people with ‘controversial’ views. This backlash against ‘precious snowflakes’

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exposes a key foundation of the current rightward shift: from a position of privilege, equality can feel like oppression.

The rejection of 'identity politics' is also the *raison d'être* of the growing 'intellectual dark web' of scholars who see themselves as mavericks and truth-tellers. Many are based outside mainstream academia, although some have university posts. Perhaps the most famous member of this group is the Toronto 'professor against political correctness' Jordan Peterson, who rages against feminism and 'cultural Marxism'. Although Peterson describes himself as a 'classical liberal', he is celebrated by the 'alt' right. In 2019 he launched a subscription-only, 'anti-censorship' website called Thinkspot. For a fee, this platform promises its writers that only a successful legal action will lead to their content being removed. And who did Peterson invite to put this commitment to the test? The far-right YouTuber and Gamergater Carl Benjamin (also known as Sargon of Akkad).<sup>19</sup>

In 2017 three scholars associated with the intellectual dark web orchestrated a hoax against Gender Studies and other disciplines. This involved submitting 20 fake articles to academic journals in Gender, Queer, Masculinities, Fat and Sexuality Studies; Critical Race and Critical Whiteness Theory; Psychoanalysis; Sociology; and Educational Philosophy. The hoax was eventually exposed in 2018 when editors of one of the journals began to suspect that the paper submitted to them, and already published, was not genuine.

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The stated aim of the hoaxers was to expose the corruption of scholarship in what they called 'grievance studies'. Their demand was that universities undertake an immediate review of all the hoaxed areas of scholarship.<sup>20</sup>

### Weaponising 'women's safety'

Right-wing attacks on feminism and Gender Studies are a defence of the heterosexual nuclear family. This is also a defence of capital and nation: protecting 'our' economy and 'our' way of life. It is impossible to disentangle the war against 'gender ideology' from the widespread racism and anti-immigrant sentiment directed at other Others also seen as threats. 'Taking our country back' and 'making it great again' means closing our doors against, expelling or assimilating anyone who dares to produce, reproduce or think differently. It means reasserting geographical *and* ideological borders: defending the normatively gendered, cis, white, enabled and 'economically productive' capitalist body against those on the outside. It means emphasising reproductive (hetero)sex.

This structural violence is linked to an uptick in physical forms: as the far right go on the march, there has been an increase in racist, homophobic and transphobic attacks on the streets. And these can be fatal, especially to the most marginalised. In the US, Brazil and many other countries, there is a pattern of deadly violence against trans women of colour. There have



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also been a number of major anti-Black, Islamophobic, antisemitic and homophobic mass shootings in both the US and overseas. There is evidence that men who perpetrate mass shootings are often domestic abusers as well, reflecting how white supremacy and heteropatriarchy go hand-in-hand.<sup>21</sup>

There has also been an explosion of harassment online. Gamergate started in 2014 – this was a targeted harassment campaign against games developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, feminist journalist Anita Sarkeesian and a number of women in the video games industry, which quickly escalated to rape and death threats. Many Gamergaters resented what they saw as the increasing influence of feminism on gamer culture. Gamergate was not the first such campaign – but it took a developing culture war mainstream, became a recruiting ground for Trump supporters and created a blueprint for subsequent far-right actions. The home addresses of Sarkeesian, Quinn and Wu were all leaked, and all three were forced to flee. Sarkeesian also received a number of terrorist threats pertaining to public speaking engagements.

Online misogyny has also become (deadly) flesh in mass killings in the US and Canada perpetrated by ‘incels’ (involuntary celibates), who blame women for their lack of access to sex. In 2014 Elliot Rodger killed six people in Isla Vista, California, after emailing a 1411-page autobiography to several people he knew. The document explored his mental health and frustration over his virginity, and called the killings

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a 'day of retribution'. Rodger was cited as an inspiration by Alex Minassian, another self-identified incel who drove his van into a crowd in Toronto in 2018, killing ten people and injuring a further sixteen. Both incels and Gamergaters are key factions in the online 'manosphere', a technological primordial soup for the gestation of far-right activists.<sup>22</sup>

Following Rodger's rampage Carl Benjamin blamed the deaths on feminism, calling it a 'disease of the modern age' that was now controlling society and had disenfranchised and radicalised young men. In the 2019 European elections, Benjamin stood as an MEP (Member of the European Parliament) candidate for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had been a central driver of Brexit. During his campaign, he defended a tweet he had sent previously to Labour MP Jess Phillips, which said he 'wouldn't even bother' to rape her. He was being accused of 'crimes against political correctness', he said. Phillips said she received 600 rape threats following Benjamin's tweet.<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin's comment to Phillips echoed one made by Bolsonaro in 2014, when during a parliamentary debate, he told MP Maria do Rosario she was 'too ugly' to rape. And across the world, reactionary politicians have expressed their privilege and entitlement via violence against women. Trump was elected president following multiple allegations: he has been publicly accused of sexual assault or misconduct by at least 22 women since the 1980s. He is the ultimate example of how economic and sexual predation go

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hand-in-hand. Trump's campaign CEO Steve Bannon, former executive chairman of Breitbart News, has faced domestic violence charges. Polish right-winger Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz, a European Parliament ally of Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage, is reported to have said domestic violence 'would help bring many wives back down to earth'.<sup>24</sup>

A month before he assumed the UK premiership in 2019, police were called to the residence of Boris Johnson and his partner Carrie Symonds, following shouting and banging which got so loud that neighbours were concerned for Symonds's welfare. At one point she was heard telling Johnson to 'get off me'.<sup>25</sup> Johnson is notorious for his sexism, racism and homophobia. He has called Black people 'piccaninnies' and said that Muslim women wearing burqas look like letterboxes. He has called gay men 'tank-topped bum-boys'. In 2007 he chose to endorse Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination by saying she had 'dyed blonde hair and pouty lips, and a steely blue stare, like a sadistic nurse in a mental hospital'.<sup>26</sup>

The far right have also made political gains by opposing feminist movements against violence, exemplified by the 2016 'Wolf Pack' case in Spain. This involved a gang rape perpetrated against an 18-year-old woman at a festival in Seville. The charges were downgraded to sexual abuse when the verdict was released in 2018, which galvanised a wave of feminist resistance. And as women took to the streets, banging pots and pans, this in turn galvanised the far right. A counter-movement of

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men formed online, and the far-right party Vox gained supporters through tirades against 'radical feminism'. Later in 2018, Vox became the first far-right party to win multiple seats in Spain since the death of Franco.<sup>27</sup>

Like the generations of colonisers and 'founding fathers' before them, these men assert their right to 'take' and 'have' women while they grab, hoard and defend economic resources. But they also weaponise the idea of (white) 'women's safety' for the same political ends. As the Brexit referendum loomed, Farage claimed that women could be at risk of 'sex attacks' from gangs of migrant men if Britain remained in the European Union. In his presidential campaign, Trump made similar comments about Mexican men crossing the border. 'Women's safety' has also been central to debates about transgender equality, in which conservatives have situated trans women as potential rapists who want to invade 'women's space'.

In 2018 UKIP appointed far-right anti-Islam ideologue 'Tommy Robinson' (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) as its advisor on 'grooming gangs'. A year later, Yaxley-Lennon was found in contempt of court for live-streaming film of defendants accused of sexually exploiting girls, in breach of a reporting ban and in interference with the course of justice. As the judgment was made, his supporters clashed with police and journalists outside the Old Bailey and chanted 'shame on you'.<sup>28</sup>

This concern with white 'women's safety' is not new; nor does it contradict the abuse perpetrated by

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powerful and privileged men. It reflects our status as property (and historically, we literally were): we are possessions of these men, to be used and abused but violently defended from the Others, especially when economic interests are at stake. The white and bourgeois rape victim has been a key motif in colonial expansion, as well as 'law and order' and anti-immigration agendas in richer countries which protect the 'haves' from the 'have nots'. Sometimes, sexual violence is a 'cultural problem' (but only when this culture is non-white). Sometimes, it is a product of male anatomy (but only when this anatomy is assigned to a trans woman or a man of colour). Sexual violence is never the violence of heteropatriarchy or globalising racial capital. Instead, representatives of patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism weaponise the idea of 'women's safety' against marginalised and hyper-exploited groups.

## The intersectionality of struggles

The Kavanaugh hearings exemplified the misogyny and violent entitlement of an administration headed by its own 'predator-in-chief'. But support for Dr Ford was bolstered by a growing resistance. The resurgent right has been met by a younger, more diverse and more radical international left, which is beginning to achieve electoral success. The movement around Jeremy Corbyn, which produced a hung parliament in the 2017 UK general election, is one example. In the

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2019 European elections, while far-right parties did well, so did progressive ones: green parties especially won a significant proportion of the vote.

The US midterms in 2018 saw record wins for women of colour. These included Sharice Davids and Deb Haaland, the first Native American women elected to Congress. They also included the four women now known as 'The Squad': Ayanna Pressley, the first Black woman elected to Congress from Massachusetts, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, the first Muslim congresswomen, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Since being elected, these women have collectively pushed progressive policies. They have also called out Trump's racism, at great political and personal risk.

With Trump's sexual transgressions still prominent in the public imagination, women's success in the 2018 midterms was partly put down to #MeToo. And #MeToo is part of a worldwide feminist resurgence, in the mainstream and outside it. The hashtag trended in at least 85 countries, with 1.7 million tweets and 12 million Facebook posts in the first six weeks.<sup>29</sup> There were allied hashtags such as #YoTambien in Spain and Latin America, #BalanceTonPorc (expose your pig) in France, and #RiceBunny in China where the original hashtag faced censorship. Google's repository #MeToo Rising contains information on many initiatives inspired by the movement, in countries across the world. For instance, in India it caused a renewal of mainstream concern with sexual violence not seen since the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey

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in 2012.<sup>30</sup> #MeToo also rejuvenated many pre-existing sexual violence projects in universities, in political institutions and in radical communities.

#MeToo reshaped – and continues to reshape – public understandings of sexual violence. At its best, it linked sexual violence with the ‘everyman’ rather than the ‘bad man’ through the volume of personal stories shared. It showed how frequently harassment and assault are perpetrated and normalised. It put all men on the spot, asking them to reflect on their own behaviour and their role in that of others. And it led to various legal reforms: for instance, a 2019 study by the US National Women’s Law Center found that following #MeToo, fifteen states passed laws protecting employees from gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work.<sup>31</sup>

But the position of #MeToo and mainstream feminism in the contemporary political field is complex. This is because narratives about gender and intersecting inequalities are being rejuvenated, fought *and weaponised*. There is a war on women raging worldwide, and an answering feminist resurgence. There is an ongoing backlash against progressive movements, which incorporates attacks on ‘gender ideology’, feminism and ‘identity politics’, and reasserts privilege in economic crisis. And ‘protecting women’ is being kicked around as a political football in the context of expanding authoritarian governments and states, and more open racism and bigotry. This is a very difficult field to navigate.

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And this raises questions that are persistent and urgent, if not new, about the role of contemporary activism against sexual violence. On this political terrain, it is more important than ever to consider what activist and scholar Angela Davis calls the 'intersectionality of struggles'.<sup>32</sup> How might mainstream feminist activism help or hinder other social justice projects, for instance around class inequality, race discrimination, migrants' rights and transgender inclusion? When violent men and governments profess their concern for 'women's safety', how should feminists respond? Do the ends always justify the means? These questions are particularly pressing for movements such as #MeToo, which gain power through providing clickbait for the 'outrage economy' of the corporate media. They are also particularly pressing for mainstream feminism because it is dominated by white and privileged women.