



THINKING GENDER IN TRANSNATIONAL TIMES

Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

Feminist Solidarity in
Times of Global Attacks

Edited by

Aiko Holvikivi · Billy Holzberg · Tomás Ojeda

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Thinking Gender in Transnational Times

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Gender theories have never been more important than now. Across the humanities and the social sciences, gender is an essential focus for economics, social policy, global politics, international relations, law and development as well as being central to a range of fields such as cultural studies, literary criticism, decolonial, postcolonial and Black studies, queer studies, psychoanalytic studies and of course, feminist studies. The book series 'Thinking Gender in Transnational Times' showcases cutting-edge transnational and interdisciplinary gender scholarship that combines theoretical approaches with transnational arenas of inquiry, or integrates theory and practice in dynamic and innovative ways. We publish transnational interdisciplinary work in the social sciences and the humanities that generates innovative contributions to the field. We encourage work that pushes at the boundaries of existing theories, extends our gendered understanding of global formations and that highlights the relevance of gender theories to the analysis of global flows, politics and practices and that are attentive to the ways in which gender is linked to other areas of analysis of interlocking oppressions and global structural relations such as 'race', ethnicity, religion, sexuality, violence, or ability.

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In memory of Hazel Johnstone

PREFACE

This collection, *Transnational Anti-Gender Politics*, is a major intervention into debates about ‘anti-gender’ movements and politics. The authors and editors track the contemporary and historical significance of ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations in and from a range of different contexts. They broaden the evidence base we have for how these movements work, push against single origin story narratives, and so deepen the theoretical analysis of ‘anti-gender’ accounts as central to conservative articulations of bodies, families, and nation-states.

HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

This collection began with a call for contributions to the *Engenderings* blog in August 2018 exploring ‘anti-gender’ attacks on gender studies as a field, individuals working within it, and what is sometimes called ‘gender ideology’ as a catch-all term identifying the ills of feminism and LGBT rights.¹ The call was a joint one between the *Engenderings* Collective and faculty at the Department of Gender Studies, following the closure of Gender Studies in Hungary, and it sought to situate that attack in the context of recent ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations in other contexts. Importantly, it asked potential contributors to explore ‘the rise of anti-gender politics in the light of intensified nationalism and racism and how are they also

¹The range of different contributions can be tracked under the ‘anti-gender’ thread on the blog. For the original call, see: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/08/29/transnational-anti-gender-politics/>

intertwined with religion, capital and heteronormative understandings of the family?’ The call began the work of asking about the similarities and differences of ‘anti-gender’ politics from different locations and asked contributors to reflect on ‘what forms of knowledge, collective action and intervention might be mobilized to stem or even reverse this anti-feminist backlash?’ In the intervening five years, the call generated just short of fifty blog posts exploring different manifestations of ‘anti-gender’ movements globally, highlighting the significance of this strand of politics worldwide and documenting the counter-movements that are also extremely vibrant (see, e.g., Cetinkaya 2021). The series generated much-needed discussion about the global attacks on women’s bodily integrity and reproductive rights, anti-feminist violence against social movements and individuals, the role of moral panics in garnering populist support for anti-feminist and homophobic agendas, and the increasing visibility and fervency of anti-trans* rhetoric both within and outside feminism.² The series enabled much-needed conceptual development about the links between nationalist border control and anti-feminist interventions and the importance of intersectional and anti-racist thought in combating ‘anti-gender’ discourse.³

The editors of this volume—Aiko Holvikivi, Billy Holzberg, and Tomás Ojeda—expanded the series to allow for fuller extension of these arguments and have worked with the series editors of *Thinking Gender in Transnational Times*⁴ to pull together a volume unique in its foregrounding of the range of ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations and forms of resistance transnationally. This has been a long road—editing work is always both a rewarding and thankless task—and the publication of this volume is testimony to the labour of everyone involved. But it is also testimony to their political resilience. Anyone involved in contemporary feminist politics in the UK will not be surprised that the series has prompted a range of complaints from ‘anti-gender’ activists asking for content to be taken down and targeted harassment of authors and editors. Its labour has taken place

² See, for example, on LGBT rights’ erosion (Eşençay 2020); on moral panic (Zaharijević 2018); on transmisogyny (Almazidi 2021).

³ See, for instance, on links between anti-Black and anti-trans movements (Michelis 2022; Tudor 2020).

⁴ ‘Thinking Gender in Transnational Times’ is a book series for Springer that foregrounds gender theories as essential for making sense of transnational politics and culture. The editors are Sumi Madhok, Leticia Sabsay, and Sadie Wearing. For the series’ web page, see <https://www.springer.com/series/14404>

within an increasingly hostile environment for gender studies scholars and feminist, queer, and anti-racist scholars and activists within the UK. The attacks on feminism are nothing new, of course, but there is an intensity of aggression currently that emerges from the confluence of the alliance between the right and the targeting of women's rights, LGBT rights and migrant, black and minority rights.⁵

It is hard to concentrate let alone hold to the importance of your political and intellectual work when you are part of a community receiving continual threats and when the people who are the most vulnerable within feminist work are positioned as the most aggressive (despite all evidence to the contrary).⁶ It is a difficult situation that feminists find ourselves in, having to defend the feminist, queer, and anti-racist successes that had only come into being so recently. Despite knowing that these were always precarious—particularly from a transnational perspective—the rolling back of abortion rights, the challenges to rights to organise, and the increasing militarisation of borders combine to generate contexts of threat and anxiety for the most vulnerable. This certainly has the capacity to produce what we might describe as political depression, where the social movements and public institutions that many of us cherish are challenged and where the values of co-operation and inclusion (that it has always been easy to scoff at) seem suddenly so important in their absence. It is perhaps an even more difficult situation to find ourselves in, as queer and intersectional feminists, having to defend commitments to a critical project that does not take 'sex' for granted and that foregrounds the relationships among different vectors of power. Those commitments are absurdly yet consistently framed as running counter to 'women's rights', as in themselves threatening the safety of women, especially when combined with anti-racism and trans-inclusivity.⁷

In many ways, 'anti-gender' claims are easy to debunk, but it is harder to weather the tide of their certainty. So, what strikes me looking through the contributions on the *Engenderings* blog again and reading through this volume is that they constitute an impressive and essential archive of

⁵With respect to the latter point, I am thinking here of the attacks on migrant rights to claim asylum currently being wielded by the Conservative Party in the UK (The Guardian 2023) and the attacks on critical race education in the USA (James 2023).

⁶*Engenderings* is publishing a range of pieces from the first Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Network (see note 8 below) as part of its ongoing commitment to resisting 'anti-gender' attacks (see Hemmings 2023; Madhok 2023).

⁷See Alyosxa Tudor, 2023, who makes this argument more fully.

the scope and intent of ‘anti-gender’ mobilisation in recent years. *And importantly they also document the refusal of intersectional, trans-inclusive, queer feminists to be cowed by these attacks.*⁸

TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Transnational Anti-Gender Politics brings together perspectives on ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations from India, Germany, Hungary, the Gulf, Chile, Spain, Turkey, South Africa, the US, Peru, Brazil, and China. Of these, only the European and Latin American contexts are usually central to the story of ‘anti-gender’ movements and their impact.⁹ So this collection expands the scope of inquiry, certainly, but in the process it also changes what the editors term the *origin stories* of ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations. Perhaps the most common origin story is one that locates increased scapegoating of feminism and LGBTI movements and identities as part of Vatican-led challenges to family and nation that are also taken up by right-wing groups or states (nationally or transnationally) as part of consolidating borders and/or religious and ethnic dominance. And these two strands—religious and nationalist—are indeed central features of ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations, including outside of Europe and Latin America (see Fassin 2022). But prioritising a broader transnational perspective, as the editors emphasise in their Introduction, begins to tease out other possible origins or eschew single origins at all. A focus on India, the Gulf, or South Africa, for example, firmly locates ‘anti-gender’ arguments in either the ongoing contexts of coloniality and/or the cynical nationalist insistence on feminism and LGBTI movements as Western imports (Borba 2022; Evang 2022). A broader transnational perspective thus confronts us

⁸ Faculty and students in the UK have been extremely active in challenging gender critical attacks on the integrity of our work in the last year. Sumi Madhok and I launched a new AHRC Network ‘Transnational Anti-gender Movements and Resistance: Narratives and Interventions’ in September 2022 (see the website for details of the project: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/gender/research/AHRC/AHRC-home>); Alyosxa Tudor, with Abeera Khan, Sophie Chamas, and Shreeta Lakhani, ran the conference ‘We Are the Feminisms in the Lecture Theatres (and on the Streets)’ in February 2023 (to challenge assumptions that sexual violence is primarily or best theorized by trans-exclusionary feminists); and the University of Newcastle will host the conference, ‘What’s Left of Sexual Democracy?’, in May 2023, to name but a few.

⁹ In a piece from 2017, Sonia Corrêa starts to identify the different strands of transnational ‘anti-gender’ politics and movements globally. At the time, however, this was unusual (Corrêa 2017).

with an important epistemological as well as political imperative: that challenging ‘anti-gender’ perspectives must grapple with both histories of conceptual and political imposition, but also refuse to cede the ground when faced with co-optation (Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019; Tudor 2021). As several chapters of this volume make clear, the task of challenging ‘anti-gender’ movements cannot afford to accept accusations that feminism is primarily external to postcolonial contexts. Not only does this suture feminism to its colonial forms, reinforcing histories of feminist resistance as Western, it also leaves ‘gender’ mired in its heterosexual, familial context, sutured to ‘sex’ rather than more open to its multiple histories of past and present (see Hemmings 2020). For the editors of this volume then, a transnational approach does more than add contexts: it also provides epistemological challenges to the concepts and methods needed to counter ‘anti-gender’ formations transnationally.

A further challenge offered through expanding the range of contexts is the presumption that ‘anti-gender’ movements reflect primarily or exclusively right-wing agendas and transformations (see Graff and Korolczuk 2022). It is certainly the case that ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations have a clear right-wing history: that’s true of Brazil, Hungary, Poland, India, Pakistan, and France. And it’s also true that these agendas are frequently co-articulated with religious attachments (or provide a truce between secular and religious attachments, as is the case in France’s ‘war’ against ‘la théorie de genre’) (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017). But anti-feminism is also alive and well in Left-wing contexts, firstly in its familiar fantasy that it is identity politics that is at least partly responsible for the demise of a transnational Left. The story here is an old, familiar one: that queers and feminists represent at best a set of niche interests that socialism will better be able to meet and at worst a weakening of Left energy that fragments solidarity.¹⁰ The claim is a compelling one, despite the fact that there has never been a time in Left-wing history, where those ‘troublemakers’ have not been central to broader social movements and where the fantasies of unity that have not included those feminists, queers, and migrants and

¹⁰ See, for example, the piece Weronika Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts, and Andrea Pető co-authored in 2017: ‘Gender as Symbolic Glue: How “Gender” Became an Umbrella Term for the Rejection of the (Neo)liberal Order’. It is one of the first to point to the problems of identity politics within feminism as key for the popularity of ‘anti-gender’ positions on the Left. As I explore here further, I see such a position as reproducing the historical, political, and ethical terms set by anti-gender activists.

anti-racist activists always reflect the interests of a Left political elite better thought of as the architects of socialism's failures.

There are two advantages of identifying Left-wing 'anti-gender' arguments as central to the story. The first is that it provides a warning not to follow in the footsteps of some European critics of 'anti-gender' movements by advocating for an approach that refuses 'identity' politics in favour of 'solidarity'. Such an approach will always mean accepting that trans*, non-binary, or decolonial feminisms are peripheral to materialist concerns, and one thing 'anti-gender' activism has shown us is that a 'sex/gender' nexus is key to both nation and coloniality (Ahmed 2016). Extending our understanding of 'anti-gender' movements to include Left-wing versions, then, re-affirms the importance of 'undoing gender' as central to decolonial, anti-capitalist projects. As Holvikivi, Holzberg, and Ojeda point out so evocatively in the introduction to this volume, the dismissal of the claims of those most directly harmed by 'anti-gender' attacks as 'merely cultural' might remind us that the links across misogyny, racism, transphobia, and homophobia have to be at the heart of our own challenges. The second, related, benefit is that, combined with anti-colonial approaches, this expansion of origin stories folds in trans-exclusionary feminist projects as central not peripheral to 'anti-gender' movements. Feminist history has never been singular and has always included versions that have sought to circumscribe the category 'woman' to include only those whose dominant interests are best served by nation and empire (Schuller and Gill-Peterson 2020). We should not be surprised by the fervent anti-trans or anti-intersectional rhetoric of some Left-oriented feminists. They draw on the Left history of blaming the most marginal for its failings, while also drawing on feminist histories that privilege whiteness and femininity as fundamental to a version of oppression that starts from vulnerability and the need for protection.¹¹

The historical project of including women in political and representational culture has always circumscribed that category to allow assimilation to the nation, as we know from feminist historians of suffrage and from Black and queer feminist theorists of the exclusionary nature of 'sex'. 'Sex' is never mobilised as a neutral category, and is never only about 'biological sexual difference', but has been and is still used as a tool for determining who makes it into the frame and indeed who counts as human. It's

¹¹ See Gail Lewis (2019) on the impact of this vulnerability for Black feminist affect and organising.

important to have that critical understanding of sex and sexuality to understand how it is that women's rights can be undermined so violently as part of the decimation of abortion rights, for example. The discourse of 'respectability' is important here as it positions some reproductive bodies as in need of protection and some as outside of the frame altogether. Consider the historical and contemporary misogynist arguments against white and black working-class women's fertility as 'out of control'; when coupled with the rise of the figure of the 'unborn child', it is the latter and not the former that are most fully within the category of human itself. Colonial and slavery history teaches us that 'sex' is circumscribed through the violence of whiteness, and queer and trans* histories of sexology and medicine point to the heteronormative underpinnings of enduring binary presumption (Bey 2019; Riley Snorton 2017). Even for those whose attachment to 'sex' as immutable resists historicisation, the racist, sexist, and heteronormative histories of its use to justify sexual violence in medicine, psychiatry, or prisons and to prevent free movement of some women (e.g., lesbians, pregnant women, those from religious minorities) should alert us to ways it is wielded as central to its meanings (Alexander 1994; Lugones 2007).

HISTORIES OF WOMANHOOD

I have written elsewhere about the ways in which thinking with sex/gender as a system can be helpful for reminding us of the ways 'woman' as an object of exchange is normalised as the result of a prior conflation of sex and gender (Hemmings 2020, 2022).¹² 'Woman', in other words, is a political category that cannot be seen outside of marital exchange or outside of an economic system of inheritance. Not all people assigned 'female' at birth get to count as women; only some get the dubious privilege of carrying the promise of familial, national, and ethnic reproduction (only rarely benefitting directly from that promise). Understandably the focus for reparative feminist projects that challenge those colonial, heteronormative, and misogynist histories tend to be on the communities, subjects, and practices that fall outside of the purview of proper 'womanhood'. So it is within much of the work on 'anti-gender' violence, including several of the contributions to this volume: the focus remains on the marginal,

¹²This is an engagement with Gayle Rubin (1975) 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex'.

demonised, and dehumanised subjects whose lives are threatened. This is important for solidarity politics, since the edges and outside of the categories naturalised by collapsing sex/gender are myriad: it is not just trans*, queer, black, or migrant bodies that can't stand in or for 'woman' (or 'man'), but also sex workers, maiden aunts, teenage mothers, and so on. Those resisting 'anti-gender' arguments, then, rightly highlight the overlaps among people never quite making it or categorically never making it.

But there's a different history to be traced here, too, one that attends less to the demonised of 'anti-gender' mobilisations and more to who it is that is being protected and privileged. What most 'anti-gender' mobilisations have in common—other than the demonisation of (certain strands of) feminism—is the reification of womanhood as a narrow and normative category. As I have been arguing thus far in this Preface, that 'woman' is constructed as a familiar figure: she is respectable, aligned with reproductive norms, a figure of national pride, and if she is not heterosexual she is a shining example of homonormative or homonationalist assimilation. That woman needs protecting from the perverse margins in all the instances of anti-gender political discourse that this book includes: feminist social movements that have gone too far; reproductive rights claims that threaten the traditional nuclear family she exemplifies; members of kinship groups that fail to reference a patriarch; and of course, excessive queer and trans* embodiments. In the UK, while abortion rights have been more or less stable for decades, most recently members of the Conservative front bench refused to rule out reviewing that provision to enshrine proper womanhood as that of mother and reproducer of the nation. The arguments about the need to export refugees to Rwanda or refuse asylum claims from people arriving in small boats are made with reference to hard-working families in the UK who are framed as deserving of protection in part because of their appropriate gendered as well as national citizenship.

Similarly, trans-exclusionary 'anti-gender' arguments in the UK are made primarily on the basis of the need to protect women to ensure their safety: in bathrooms, on the streets, and in prisons. In 2018, the UK Government released a public consultation on the Gender Recognition Act which included questions about whether people thought that allowing gender self-determination would threaten the exclusions in the Equality Act that allow for same-sex accommodation or competition (e.g., in sports). Interestingly, while the majority of respondents had no problem with self-determination as a general principle, the sticking point was when

this was posed as threatening to women's *sense of safety* (the proposed changes had no bearing on the exceptions in the Equality Act).¹³ This framing of woman's safety as articulated primarily in response to sexual threat has a long history in a range of different contexts. It is the black man—the (ex) slave, the colonised subject, the migrant—who is cast as the inevitable rapist¹⁴; it is the working class and migrant lack of sexual control that make their fertility an issue¹⁵; it is the homosexual who rapes children¹⁶; it is the trans* interloper whose main aim is to assault women.¹⁷ These threats to women always come from outside, never from inside, never from within the family. And they never come from institutions, from the violence of the Church, the School, or the Prison, despite all of these institutions thriving through sexual and other forms of misogynist and racist violence (Rodriguez, Ben-Moshe and Rakes 2020; Tudor 2020). Ironically, we might say, the narrow and normative category of 'woman' that is mobilised so forcefully by 'anti-gender' actors as being rooted in 'sex' as nature is in fact a highly constructed figure: she is *already framed* through sexual vulnerability and the need for protection and the ability to be recognised as one is historically and politically over-determined.

As I have been arguing here, then, and as the editors lay out in their Introduction, an intersectional, historical, and transnational approach to 'anti-gender' movements is essential for identifying the links across the different forms of what we might think of as displaced violence. To return to the start of this Preface, this collection also helps to explain why it is that 'anti-gender' attacks *feel* so difficult to counter. In inverting the relationship between subject and object of violence, in casting pregnant, migrant, black, of colour, poor women, and non-binary or trans* people as the ones with power, the political feeling is of defensive paranoia. As the contributors to and editors of this collective make plain, it is time to go on

¹³See Claire Thurlow's (2023) intervention that challenges misinformation about trans* rights and The Equality Act.

¹⁴Paradigmatically, Angela Davis identifies the historical and contemporary over-association of black men with sexual violence in *Rape, Racism and the Capitalist Setting*, and Billy Holzberg, Anouk Madörin, and Michelle Pfeifer (2021) consider this legacy as part of border control in contemporary Europe.

¹⁵Imogen Tyler's (2013) work on abjection and the sexual politics of class and gender in the UK is paradigmatic on this issue.

¹⁶For a history of the over-association of paedophilia with homosexuality in Australia see Steven Angelides (2005).

¹⁷See, for example, Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan (2022).

the offensive, to make the links between those made most marginal clear, to problematise the history of ‘womanhood’ as a violent and exclusionary one, and to make the connections across transnational sites a routine part of our work. It is also a moment for us feminists working in specific locations—universities, policy units, NGOs, activist movements—to do the work of finding productive ways of communicating (I won’t suggest a common language) in order to continue to actively resist the violent hostilities we are facing.

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

In recent years, attacks on the rise of ‘gender ideology’ and ‘genderism’ as a political force, on gender studies as an academic field, and on feminist, queer, and trans individuals seen to be their embodied representatives have grown in scope and intensity. This edited volume understands such attacks as a global force in need of urgent analytical and political attention and interrogates them from a specifically transnational feminist perspective. Drawing on contributions from and about a varied range of geographical locations including Argentina, Chile, China, Germany, the Persian Gulf, Hungary, India, Pakistan, Peru, South Africa, Spain, Turkey, Uganda, the UK, and the US, this book explores how anti-gender mobilisations work as a transnational formation shaped by the legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and resurgent nationalisms and how these can be resisted.

The transnational approach developed in the book troubles the ‘origin stories’ we tell about where anti-gender politics come from and counteracts the erasure of certain non-Western locations and struggles from scholarly consideration. By transnationalising our inquiries into the epistemic, affective, and political nature of the anti-gender phenomenon, this volume helps to better locate the various sources, actors, and networks behind contemporary opposition to gender, contesting the notion that anti-gender politics derive solely from right-wing nationalist or conservative religious actors, to show how they also derive from more centrist, liberal, leftist, and even presumably feminist positions. The book thus invites us to sharpen and rethink the conceptual vocabularies and strategies we use to understand and resist anti-gender attacks, opening up space for envisioning new political imaginaries and transnational feminist solidarities.

Praise for *Transnational Anti-Gender Politics*

“*Transnational Anti-Gender Politics* is a crucial theoretical and political intervention into the anti-gender debates. The scholarly contributions expose how anti-gender mobilisations across the globe manifest in articulations of nationalism, right wing populism, racism, homophobia, and normative understandings of the family. This insightful and thoughtful collection of essays from a range of contexts speaks to the transnational significance of these concerns and is a timely and vital intervention.”

—Professor Ratna Kapur, *Chair in Global Law, Queen Mary University of London*

“This is a very timely volume that undertakes wide-ranging perspectives on contemporaneous practices of anti-gender politics. Beyond reinforcing the very real dangers of transnational anti-gender experiences, what the contributors have also managed to do is challenge the processes and practices of knowledge production that pigeonhole this phenomenon within certain regions or sites of politics. This edited collection is a timely and important feminist addition to ongoing debates about reactionary politics within and without the academy.”

—Professor Toni Hastrup, *University of Manchester, United Kingdom*

“Tracking and tracing anti-gender movements as they morph and metastasise across time and space, this collection is a sharp, necessary and timely tool. Challenging us to think transnationally, the authors join the dots between seemingly disparate events, exposing the trick by which we are made to defend gender only on the constraining colonial terms offered—an exceptional volume.”

—Dr B Camminga, *Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI), Berlin*

“As the war on gender studies and battles against LGBTIQ+ individuals and communities continue to erupt on multiple fronts across the world, this book offers a set of timely, insightful analyses to better understand, resist, and overcome the reactionary and deadly anti-gender politics. Edited with great care, it is an act of hope, and it builds on and expands the grounds for transnational feminist and queer solidarities.”

—Professor Agata Lisiak, *Professor in Migration Studies, Bard College Berlin*

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