

Decolonising Gender Studies – some statements

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1. Gender Studies and Decolonisation Studies have a strong common denominator as critical studies. Both challenge the existing power structures. Power not only regards the ability to influence behavior of others and the ability to use the surrounding world for one's own benefit, but also the ability to determine what counts as knowledge and truth. Gender Studies and Decolonisation are by definition critical studies because they challenge the discourses around gender, race, and other social differences and unmask the power dynamics behind taken for granted visions and assumptions.
2. Cultural and/or religious discourses and relational processes play an important role in bolstering the power structures that privilege dominant groups over others. By lending credibility to for example patriarchal norms and Western values, they contribute to these power dynamics at the expense of women, children, lgbt-persons, indigenous groups, and so on. At the same time, religion and culture also offer broad repertoires that marginalized groups can use to reclaim their proper space and make their voices heard. Marginalized groups can learn to 'read between the cracks' of the sacred texts to challenge the ways in which oppressive powers use those sacred texts.
3. Given the parallels between patriarchy and colonialism (and other power dynamics like capitalism, ableism, ageism, and extractivism), an intersectional approach is needed. Marginalization in one dimension (e.g., gender) can coincide with marginalization in another dimension. There are strong correlations between gender, poverty, education, and so on. This is not absolute. The intersectional paradigm also helps to understand that when a person or group is marginalized in one dimension, there may be other dimensions through which they can 'play' the power system. That is why for example education can be a way to limit the negative effects of patriarchy (Kartini 😊).
4. Gender Studies itself is the relatively recent name for a developing movement that shows different historical phases. The first wave of feminism aimed for equal rights, especially regarding property and voting. The second wave focused on equality and anti-discrimination (and partly turned into a polarized 'anti-male' movement). The third wave looked at differences between women, acknowledging that not all women have the same position or characteristics. The fourth wave (or maybe extension of the third wave) takes different shapes in looking at intersectionality, sexual violence, and gender in the digital world. The term gender studies applies mostly to the third and fourth wave. A critical and radical version connecting gender with race, is for example womanism.
5. Within the field of Gender Studies, the critical study of masculinities emerged much later (parallel to third wave feminism). In this field, traditional and dominant perspectives on masculinity were challenged. The approach of critical masculinities is in some ways more complicated than that of feminism. Both aim to bring forward the specific and subjective perspectives and positions of males / females (and increasingly also those who don't feel at home in this binary model). For a long time, men were not interested in gender studies, apart from a small group of non-heteronormative men like in the gay community.

6. Especially in the third and fourth wave, Gender Studies has been discussed as having a neocolonial bias in focusing strongly on western types of diversity and not acknowledging the same range of diversity in other contexts. Since the beginning of the first wave of feminism, there have been critical voices of Black women (like Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman"). Again, the intersection of gender, race, and power needs reflection. The ways toward equality and emancipation may be different for marginalized groups in different contexts and cultures.
7. The process of decolonisation and critical approaches to gender in formerly colonized contexts and marginalized groups is different from the process in formerly colonizer contexts and dominant groups. In a sense, it is more complicated for those belonging to the dominant group (Male, Western, Academic, Rich, Heterosexual) to recognize that their perspective is subjective and oppressive, because they automatically think that it is objective, normal, and true. To decolonize gender studies in Indonesia perhaps means to uncover the rich variety of gender expressions in the diverse cultures of Indonesia and to show how this variety has been suppressed by colonial powers (as well as by new external influences from Western commercial powers or Arab religious norms). To decolonize gender studies in the Netherland means that white leaders in the field, who have often built their academic power position from a personal history of marginalization because of their gender or sexual identity, should be willing to step back and allow voices from other cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and so on, to co-define and re-define the field.
8. It is very difficult to decolonize the colonizers and to engage gender-dominant people in this critical debate. But it is essential to do so if we want to support freedom and flourishing for all.