

## WOMEN'S REALITIES, WOMEN'S CHOICES: AN INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES

Hunter College Women's and  
Gender Studies Collective and Joan  
Simalchik  
Don Mills: Oxford University  
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REVIEWED BY HANNAH  
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*Women's Realities, Women's Choices* is an overview text that introduces how broad patterns and systems of power impact women's lives and its commitment to an intersectional approach to feminist analysis avoids falling into a universalizing view of women. Every chapter emphasizes the ways that multiple social systems like colonialism, global capitalism, medicine, race, religion, and sexuality are layered to produce the highly varied and contingent conditions of women's lives.

The text achieves an impressive breadth of information that spans wide stretches of space and time while still grounding concepts in familiar and understandable examples. This book is the Canadian edition of a textbook produced by the the Hunter College Women's and Gender Studies Collective. The collective is an interdisciplinary group of scholars affiliated with the Women and Gender Studies Department at Hunter College and includes Linda Martin Alcoff, Jacqueline Nassy Brown, Sarah E. Chinn, Florence L. Denmark, Dorothy O. Helly, Shirley Hune, Rupal Oza, and Carolyn M. Somerville, with adaptation for the

Canadian edition provided by Joan Simalchik. Simalchik is an associate professor and coordinator of the interdisciplinary Women and Gender Studies Program at the University of Toronto Mississauga and her adaptation thoroughly explores the particular dimensions that affect the lives of Canadian women and provides contemporary examples and statistics along with a sustained focus on the varied experiences of Indigenous peoples, immigrants, queer folk, and others while still exploring global conditions for women.

The text is divided into three major sections, "Defining Women and Gender," "Women's Relationships, Women's Selves," and "Women in Society," and these sections are further broken into thematic chapters. Though every individual chapter is furnished with enough history and context around its topic to be read totally independently, the first section, "Defining Women and Gender," lays important groundwork for helping students to understand broad theories such as social constructionism with nuance and introduces the ways that different feminist perspectives have approached thinking about women's lives. This first section also invites the reader to become aware of the ways that power has structured the goals and thinking of certain feminist approaches. Crucially, the book repeatedly reminds the reader throughout all three sections that certain feminist perspectives have erased the experiences of marginalized women or even been used to justify ongoing imperialism and colonization.

*Women's Realities, Women's Choices* introduces topics to readers by first presenting the hegemonic understanding of a given subject before un-

packing its more complex structures, and while this approach is useful in providing a familiar entry point for the reader, especially those with no prior knowledge of the issues, it can occasionally leave non-dominant experiences with less focused attention. For example, "Chapter 8: Women's Health," gives excellent explanations as to how women's health is largely socially determined by factors like poverty or discriminatory perceptions of women of colour, but then only briefly mentions the health care experiences of queer and trans women which become an afterthought to the experiences of cisgender heterosexual women. This is not to say that the book fails in its intersectional goals – far from it – but to point out that there are still some gaps in representation that would need to be filled with supplementary reading.

Despite covering a wide range of topics and perspectives on the highly varied lives of women in Canada and around the world, *Women's Realities, Women's Choices* manages to be detailed without becoming overwhelming or meandering. While there are some lengthy passages in certain sections, overall the text is approachable and the addition of supplementary "boxes" helps break up the text to provide primary source examples of women's writings, expanded examples, tables, and images. Every chapter is introduced with a brief outline and set of learning goals and key terms are highlighted throughout each chapter and are defined in the textbook's glossary. Each chapter ends with a summary, five or six discussion questions, and a thorough list of recommended readings. The recommended reading lists strike an admiral balance of providing a range of sources from different

periods and perspectives while not presenting a daunting bibliography. These resources make the book easy to read and comprehend initially and return to as a study guide and reference later, making it especially helpful to first-year students.

*Women's Realities, Women's Choices* serves as an excellent introductory overview and would be a welcome companion to any early undergraduate social science and humanities course interested in critically exploring the lived realities of women both in and beyond Canada.

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## **FEMINISM: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE IDEAS, DEBATES, & POLITICS OF THE MOVEMENT**

Deborah Cameron  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019

### **REVIEWED BY KI WIGHT**

Deborah Cameron's compact monograph on the history, tenor, and tensions of feminism and feminist movements is an impressively accessible short and comprehensive read. While Cameron situates the book within current global-capitalist exploitations of women, its primary focus is on Western Anglo-American feminisms. She underscores that all feminist movements are linked by the fundamental beliefs that women

occupy systematically disadvantaged positions in society, and that social and political action can yield positive change for women.

The seven-chapter book surveys feminism from various historical and cultural perspectives, and highlights the importance of intersectional lenses on feminist issues. Six themes are addressed specifically: domination, rights, work, femininity, sex, and culture. The final chapter highlights contemporary tensions between feminisms and more pluralistic and non-binary concepts of gender, and concludes with optimistic notes on feminist futures.

The introductory chapter summarizes core feminist concepts, notably Crenshaw's intersectionality, alongside a brief historical review of first through fourth-wave movements. Cameron makes the critical point that conceiving of feminism as a series of waves gives the sense that feminist thought and action is discontinuous, and can lead to limiting or totalizing understandings of feminism. She urges us to conceive of feminism as continuous, diverse, and in relation to local or specific contexts.

Social characteristics of patriarchal domination leads into the first themed chapter on domination. A scan of domination through history includes women's property rights, Marxist critiques of gender roles under capitalism, wage inequity, and the paternalism inherent to biological determinism. Challenges to women's bodily autonomy is a persistent theme, including a contemporary link to rising White supremacy and alt-right movements.

Cameron's review of women's rights layers social and political context with nuance and care, and includes tension points, inequities, or contested elements of certain rights struggles. In particular, she highlights the problem of exclusion by White liberal feminisms. Bodily autonomy

continues as a core topic and includes far-reaching examples such as workplace discrimination and harassment, domestic work pressures, global capitalism's exploitation of reproductive capacity through surrogacy, and the pervasive anti-Muslim racism fueling policies that ban women's faith-based symbols and attire.

The chapter on work outlines the long relationship between capitalism and oppression of women, particularly the overrepresentation of women doing unpaid domestic care. Cameron offers historical and theoretical analyses of gendered work, and punctuates the chapter with futuristic theories by Angela Davis and Shulamith Firestone that imagine collectivized domestic work in order to challenge oppressive household and workplace structures.

Social constructions of gender, and impositions of gender norms, comprise the chapter on femininity, concluding with the intersections of racism, colonialism and gender-based exploitation. The chapter on sex surveys feminist activism relating to bodily autonomy and pleasure, and explores how feminist movements have either embraced or denounced sex positivity, pornography, and sex work.

In the last themed chapter, Cameron examines male-centred bias in cultural movements and canons, and summarizes theoretical work that challenges patriarchal cultural bias. The book's final chapter concludes with a call for collective-minded activism to challenge systemic oppressions and power relations, and warns against feminisms that are limited to individualistic and capitalistic realms.

As a book centring Western or Anglo-American feminisms, with frequent references to Black feminist contributions, the #metoo and #timesup social media movements, and the violence of alt-right and men's rights movements, I noted two absent