

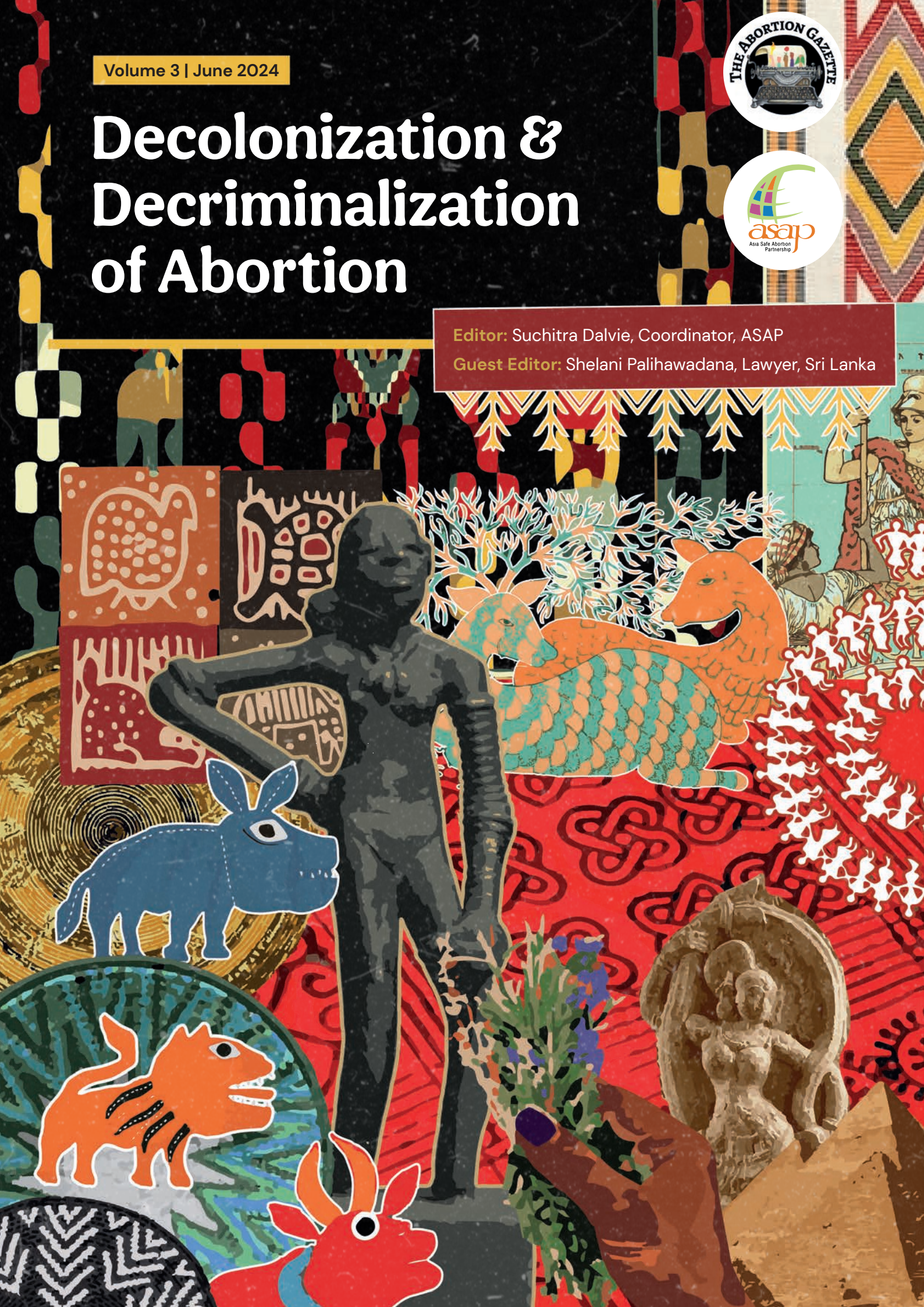
Volume 3 | June 2024

Decolonization & Decriminalization of Abortion



Editor: Suchitra Dalvie, Coordinator, ASAP

Guest Editor: Shelani Palihawadana, Lawyer, Sri Lanka



Decolonization & Decriminalization of Abortion



EDITOR:

Suchitra Dalvie is the Coordinator of the Asia Safe Abortion Partnership since its founding in March 2008. She is a gynaecologist and has over two decades of experience working in the development sector.



GUEST EDITOR:

Shelani Palihawadana is the Program Director at Youth Advocacy Network Sri Lanka and a practising lawyer specializing in Public Law, Writ and Fundamental Rights applications. Her primary focus revolves around enhancing the accessibility of SRHR information for young people through inclusive digital platforms.

EDITORIAL TEAM:



Nandini Mazumder
Assistant
Coordinator



Ayesha Bashir
Communication and
Network Manager



Mahak Agarwal
Communication and
Network Officer

Why do we need to talk about Decolonization?

Editorial by Suchitra Dalvie



The word “decolonisation” was [first coined](#) by the German economist Moritz Julius Bonn in the 1930s to describe former colonies that achieved self-governance.

But before we start to unpack the nuances and complexities of Decolonization and what it looks like, we need to start with an understanding of what is Colonization and how it has shaped the world as we know it now.

To put it simply, Colonization is the practice of domination.

It is when people of a country violently invade another and claim the land as its own, when new inhabitants move in and forcibly push out, control and oppress people who are indigenous to the land.

Not only is *land* stolen in the colonization process but the colonizers also steal much of the indigenous people’s *culture*. They impose their own culture on the people whose country they occupy by positioning it as a superior option.

The origins of colonization in most cases started off as trade or perhaps an attempt to discover new worlds or escape the persecution of the Old World but in all cases it ended up with conquest and oppression.

The scope and scale of this oppression was such that tens of millions of Africans were sold into slavery. While slaves have never received reparations for being sold, the British government was – in 2015 – still paying slave owners reparations for their lost property upon the abolition of slavery. On March 22, 1873, the Spanish National Assembly finally abolished slavery in Puerto Rico. The owners were compensated with 35 million pesetas (approximately US\$200,000) per enslaved Black person from Spain. However; the enslaved Black men, women and children were required to continue working for three more years.



The Mercantilist Argument for Colonial Expansion



Source: Philip Dorf, *Our Early Heritage: Ancient and Medieval History*, Oxford Book Company (adapted)

According to a [recent study](#) the killing of 56 million indigenous people by the European invaders in South, Central and North America caused a drop in global temperature in the 1600s.

The impacts of colonization were similar everywhere, regardless of the specific colonizer: disease; destruction of indigenous social, political, and economic structures; repression, exploitation; land displacement; and land degradation.

In countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand many generations of Aboriginal children were forcibly separated from their parents and sent to residential schools run by churches where they faced physical and sexual abuse which has left scars of intergenerational trauma.

As the academic Patrick Wolfe said “invasion is a structure not an event.”

The word “Neocolonial” was coined by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president, in the early 1960s to refer to the continuity of the former colonizer’s power through economic, political, educational and other informal means.

Unable to let its colonies go, France continues to exploit African countries with unfair obligations, one of which has raised a raging debate over the years. In Guinea, for example, the French destroyed everything they could not take back

to their country. They burned food, killed cows, and destroyed buildings and books. These outrageous actions were all because Guinea wanted independence. Belgium transferred its debt to the World Bank, incurred by the Belgian colonial government, to Congo.

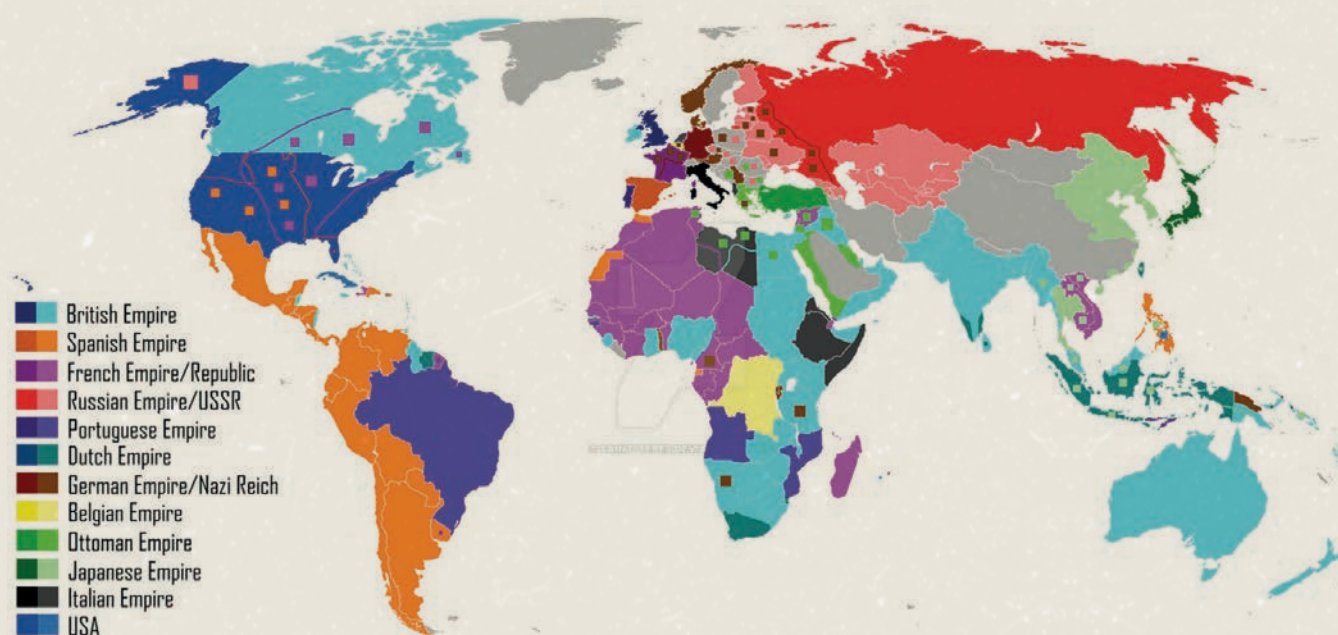
Below is a map showing the extent of colonization:

On the cusp of industrialization and the waning end of feudalism were also the witch hunts. These were the deliberate torture and killing of women who had knowledge of medicine and were able to support other women in managing their reproductive lives, including obtaining abortions.

This was further amplified by colonialism which spread the system of ‘modern medicine’ which served the criminalization, patriarchy and capitalism through its deep rooted misogyny and inventive ways of controlling women’s sexual and reproductive choices.

Now in 2024, decolonization is not only about shifting the larger power structures but also the inner workings of our societies and our personal lives, especially in the context of SRHR where many of our laws, policies, education, health system approaches are all deeply influenced by this series of unfortunate events.

It is in the backdrop of this history that we need to understand Decolonization and Indigenization.



Decolonization and Decriminalization 101

Lead Article by Guest Editor Shelani Palihawadana



Regardless of where in the world you come from, you have probably learnt about or heard about colonization in textbooks—either from the perspective of the colonizer or the colonized.

For much of our childhood, it was merely a term we used to score higher marks in history exams. As a South Asian, a Sri Lankan, a woman and an avid reader, I remember feeling conflicted when I encountered the massively toned-down and whitewashed accounts of colonization in textbooks, only to then read folklore books that told an entirely different story.

This is best portrayed by a quote by Eduardo Galeano commenting on the Colonization of the Americas *“In 1492, the natives discovered they were Indians, discovered they lived in America, discovered they were naked, discovered that the Sin existed, discovered they owed allegiance to a King and Kingdom from another world and a God from another sky, and that this God had invented the guilty and the dress, and had sent to be burnt alive who worships the Sun the Moon the Earth and the Rain that wets it.”*

It is important to note that the term “decolonization” is traditionally defined as the [retreat of European colonization](#). Scholars from the Global North in the early to mid-20th century described decolonization as being centered around the creation of self-governing states. Some go as far as to define it as the [rejection of the civilization of the White man](#).

They define it as the pursuit of cultural, psychological, and economic freedom for Indigenous people, with the ultimate goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty—the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political and economic systems.


However, more [recent definitions](#), coined by scholars and activists from the Global South and Indigenous communities, who, for the better part of the history were not afforded a chance to speak their truth in forums dominated by the global north, view decolonization differently.

Unfortunately various forms of colonization still exist today, often [unacknowledged](#).

How Colonization led to Criminalization

One of the most enduring changes of colonization was in the legal and criminal justice systems. The absence of “civilized” systems, as perceived by the colonizers, was greatly exploited. For example, the enactment of the [Wasteland Ordinance No.](#)





[1 of 1897](#) in Sri Lanka claimed all unclaimed land for the state, using it for plantations. The concept of title documents required to prove land ownership was an alien notion to Sri Lankans at that time and this led to many people losing the land held by them for generations.

The result was a hybrid system which was rooted in the colonial values but featured a shadow of the culture it represented.

Similarly, cultural practices and laws were codified with changes to suit the sensibilities of the “civilized man.” The codified version of the [Kandyan Law](#) is referred to as “Anglo-Kandyan Law” by legal scholars in Sri Lanka, as significant features that provided structure to the indigenous civilization were removed to align with the value system of the British colonizers.

Many practices, such as the use of herbs for medicinal and recreational purposes, abortion, and ways of life such as homosexuality, were criminalized to conform to the value system prevalent in the home countries of the colonizers.

The current issue lies in the fact that many Global South nations have not moved on from the colonial legal systems. This colonial legacy continues to shape societal norms and legal frameworks, perpetuating a disconnect between traditional cultural practices and imposed legal standards. As in many cases, women and structurally excluded communities are disproportionately affected by such criminalization, perpetuating inequalities, marginalizing these groups further and restricting their rights and freedoms.

What to look out for and the way forward

Arguably, one silver lining is that there have been significant victories in moving away from the oppressive colonial legacy, led by the [LGBTIQ and feminist movements](#). However, it is crucial to remain vigilant against other power structures that informally impose and maintain a similar hold on the Global South, ensuring it remains ‘the Global South’.

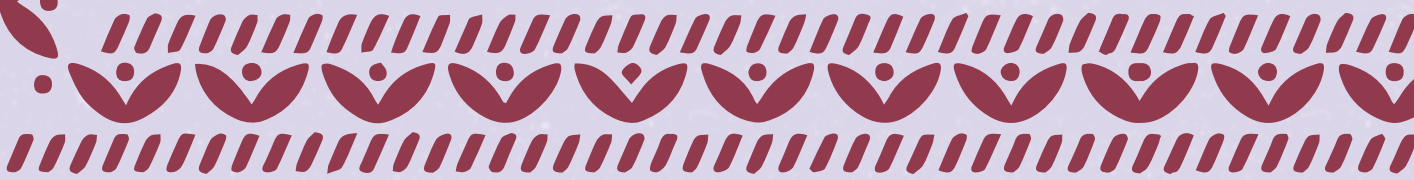
This necessitates viewing decolonization as a process that addresses not only past wrongs and exploitations but also the silent, yet potent, forms of oppression we encounter today.

Author [Jennifer Manning](#) describes decolonial feminist theory as challenging the dominant structures that have rendered the agency of Global South women invisible by giving legitimacy to their knowledge and their experiences of gender, identity, and work.

Final Thoughts

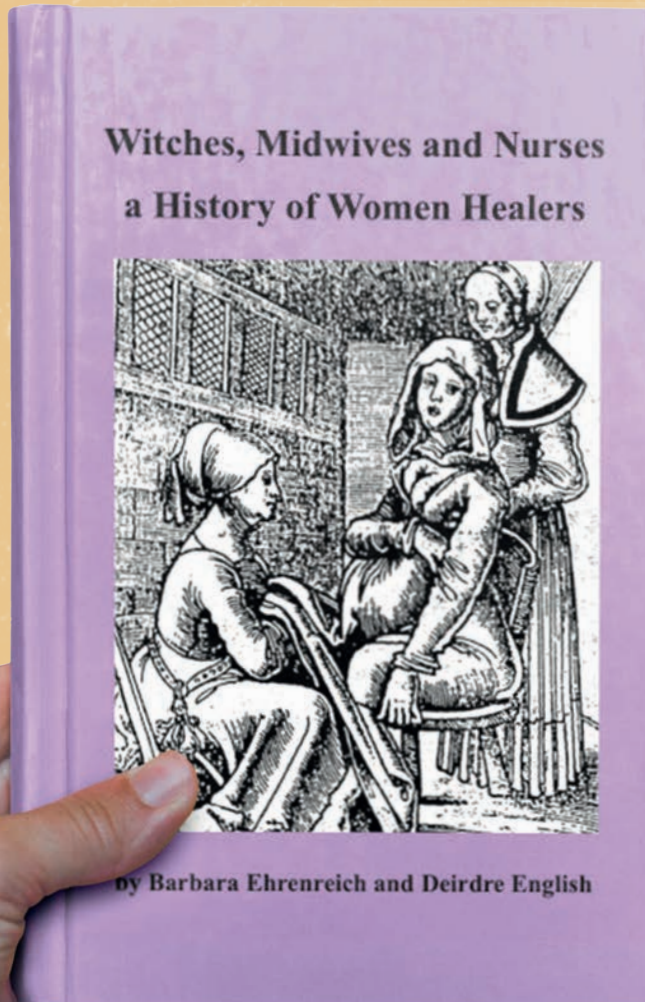
Decolonization is an ongoing process. It’s not just about correcting past oppressions, but also about identifying and challenging the structures and ideologies that continue to reinforce the marginalization and oppression brought about by colonization.

If you’re wondering how to fight it—how to decolonize—the best way to start is through introspection and gaining awareness of how much our day-to-day lives are impacted by colonial and neo-colonial structures.



In Defence of Witches

Book Review by Gabino Iglesias



Excerpt: It's been fifty years since Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English first connected the dots in their book "Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers." In it, they charted the marginalization of women from their own reproductive care.

European and colonial Witchcraft Acts of the 16th and 17th centuries overwhelmingly targeted females. Over 80% of the victims arrested, tortured and executed were women.

What's fascinating is that our modern practice of obstetrics is so sterile, medicalized and frankly masculine that the closest analogue we have for older, more feminine methods is witchcraft.

You picture a woman who perhaps prescribes herbal remedies and performs reassuring rituals related to a pregnant woman and her fetus, likely in her own home, who knows her and recognizes her pains. Sounds like a witch.

Mid 19th century literature and fairy tales further created negative stereotypes around women healers. One such has a character called "Mother Higgins" who is an untrained abortionist hired by wealthy men with pregnant mistresses to perform surgical abortions. She also commits infanticide after the children are born, and she helps the protagonist kidnap, rape and kill adult women.

As author Carmen Maria Machado says in her book *In Defence of Witches*, we no longer burn, hang, or drown as many women now as we did in the past, "but there is no shortage of ways women's lives continue to be destroyed. Women are abused, assaulted, economically disempowered, raped, shoved into the margins, pressured, silenced, ignored, treated as guinea pigs, co-opted, stolen from, misrepresented, forced into pregnancy or servitude, imprisoned, and, yes, sometimes murdered."

Witches were healers and knew things about nature that others ignored. They had the freedom to pursue knowledge because they weren't married and had no kids. In modern societies, we encourage girls to get educated — and then push on them the idea that they are supposed to have children to fulfill their roles as women and to have a full life.

Once they have "achieved" motherhood, they should take care of the house and the babies, cook, clean, and make sure their children get an education, but that all happens — and there are plenty of writers talking about that in the book — at the expense of the time these women could spend working on their passions, pursuing more knowledge, or, as in some cases here, writing masterpieces.

"Self-sacrifice remains the only fate imaginable for women. More precisely, it is a self-sacrifice that operates by way of abandoning one's own creative potential rather than by its realization."



The Five Stages of Decolonization

Proposed by Poka Laenui, Institute for the Advancement of Hawaiian Affairs

1

The first stage is a call to rediscovery and recovery, where a colonized or previously colonized region actively rediscovers its roots in order to reclaim the value of its own culture, history and traditions of its own particular region.

2

The second stage is labeled as the stage of grief and mourning, where people as a community, process and understand any trauma that the colonized may have experienced. This is often expressed in the form of anger, frustration, and protest.

3

The third stage of decolonization, often labeled as the most crucial, is the process of building the future of the proposed new culture. This takes place most commonly through debate or consultation where discussions involve the future of the culture, the governing procedures and body and the reestablishment of culture.

4

The fourth stage comes as a result of a successful third stage, where the fourth stage is about commitment to a single decided cause and direction for the culture. This stage is a collection of all of the people's voices that are unified in a direction so clear cut that the culture can proceed to the final stage.

5

The fifth and most commonly final stage of decolonization is the action which can express itself in a variety of ways, through reclaiming what was once theirs.

The process of the previous four stages sometimes cannot be afforded to a culture if they are under serious threat, in which case the fifth stage tends to manifest itself faster.

Resources for Understanding Decolonization & its connection with Decriminalization of Abortion



Deepen your understanding of decolonization | Samantha Moyo | TEDxBrighton

University of Regina | PRESSBOOK

DECOLONIZATION & CRIMINOLOGY

By Charmine Cortez

UConn Today | News Article

Abortion in Colonial America: A Time of Herbal Remedies and Accepted Actions

By Kimberley Philips

BMC | Open Access Report

Decolonizing Global Health: what should be the target of this movement and where does it lead us?

By Xiaoxiao Kwete et al.

Cambridge University Press | Journal



Introduction to Indigenizing and Decolonizing Feminist Philosophy

By Celia T. Bardwell-Jones and Margaret A. McLaren

The Harvard Gazette

How a Bioethicist and a Doctor Sees Abortion

By Alvin Powell, and a Harvard Staff Writer

HISTORY.COM

The Criminalization of Abortion Began as a Business Tactic

By Erin Blakemore

**Click on the window to follow each link!*

Decolonizing Medicine

Dr. Sandra Suryadana, Indonesia

Dr. Sandra Suryadana is the Founder and Managing Director of Doctors Without Stigma Community, and is Alumni of the Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya. She has worked as a functional doctor in seven provinces across Indonesia. Currently employed at a medical community and education sharing startup in Jakarta. Since 2019, initiated the social movement “Doctors Without Stigma,” which has now evolved into the “Doctors Without Stigma” community, comprising 90 medical professionals from various fields.



Q. What is the role of colonization in the criminalization of the abortion law in your country/region?

The enduring influence of Dutch colonization on Indonesia’s legal framework, particularly regarding abortion laws, has had profound and lasting effects. During its colonial rule, the Dutch implemented the *Wetboek van Strafrecht voor Nederlandsch-Indië* (Dutch Penal Code), which established strict regulations on abortion and influenced Indonesian laws well beyond its independence in 1945. This code, reflecting 19th-century Dutch socio-cultural and religious norms, criminalized abortion except under vaguely defined circumstances. Even after Indonesia gained independence, it continued to operate under these outdated and restrictive laws.

For instance, the legal system inadequately addressed sexual violence, child abuse, and domestic violence until much later. Perpetrators of sexual violence faced minimal penalties, with fines as trivial as 4500 rupiahs—equivalent to about 2 US cents today—until this law was revised in 2012. Significant legal reforms were slow; laws specifically addressing child abuse and domestic violence were not enacted until 2002 and 2004, respectively, and the latest legislation against sexual violence was only established in 2022.

The Health Law of 1992 avoided the direct use of the term “abortion” and instead referred to it as the “termination of pregnancy.” Abortion was permitted under specific conditions: if a doctor certified the pregnancy as a life threat, if there was familial consent, positive laboratory tests were presented, and the woman agreed to use contraception afterward.

This legal framework mirrored a broader colonial mentality that imposed Western legal and moral standards on colonized societies, often ignoring local cultural nuances and the autonomy of indigenous populations. These laws served not only as tools of legal control but also as instruments for asserting moral and cultural dominance. As a result, they often failed to reflect or meet the contemporary values or needs of the Indonesian people.

It wasn’t until the reform of the Health Law in 2009, which was updated in 2023, that more progressive changes were implemented. These amendments allowed for medical abortions under specific circumstances, such as cases of sexual violence or when the mother’s health was at risk, marking a significant move toward recognizing and addressing women’s rights and health needs. This change represents a crucial departure from Indonesia’s colonial past, aligning its legal standards more closely with current societal values and the essential rights of its citizens.

Q. What is the importance of decolonization of the law to improve access to safe abortions? (In Indonesia it probably overlaps with religion also so you can add as relevant)

Decolonization of the law is vital for fostering an equitable and progressive framework that aligns legal standards with contemporary societal needs and values, especially in the context of reproductive rights and access to safe abortions. In Indonesia, where the law is deeply entwined with religion and traditional customs, this process is particularly critical.

For instance, while Indonesia's legal system is not religion based, Aceh province operates under Sharia law, and many other regions incorporate local customary practices (adat) into their legal decisions. These varied legal landscapes can create inconsistencies in access to healthcare services, including abortion. Decolonization can help dismantle remnants of colonial legal systems that may no longer be relevant or beneficial, replacing them with laws that are developed through local contexts and considerations.

Effective decolonization requires a commitment to inclusive dialogue that engages not just the government but also religious leaders, indigenous authorities, and the broader community. This dialogue should aim to bridge understanding and respect diverse perspectives while seeking to establish a common commitment to upholding human rights, including reproductive rights.

By promoting open conversations and inclusive policymaking, Indonesia can move towards a more holistic approach that respects both universal human rights and local cultural values. This balance is crucial for ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their geographical or cultural background, have equal access to safe and informed reproductive health choices. This approach not only enhances fairness and equality in healthcare but also strengthens the societal fabric by fostering respect and understanding across diverse groups.

Q. What is the importance of decolonization of medical education to become more supportive of safe abortion rights?

Decolonization in medical education is important to eliminate Eurocentric and patriarchal views, so that we see all humans equally and support marginalized groups. This allows us to prioritize a system that offers greater empathy and care for victims and survivors, also giving women their autonomy to decide.

Decolonization of medical education is crucial for reshaping curricula to move away from Eurocentric and patriarchal perspectives, which often dominate medical training and practice. By addressing these biases, medical education can foster a more inclusive, empathetic, and culturally sensitive healthcare environment. This shift is essential for supporting safe abortion rights and acknowledging the autonomy of all patients, particularly women and marginalized groups.

The traditional medical curriculum often marginalizes or outright ignores the diverse cultural, social, and gender-specific factors that Indonesia has that influence health outcomes. By integrating a decolonized approach, medical education can better prepare future healthcare professionals to understand and address these dynamics. This includes recognizing the rights of women to make informed decisions about their own bodies, free from coercion or judgment.

Decolonizing medical education involves critically examining and revising teaching materials and methods to ensure they are not only inclusive but also respectful of the varied ways in which different cultures approach healthcare. It also means enhancing the training that medical students receive in areas like gender studies, social determinants of health, and ethics, which are pivotal for understanding the complexities surrounding abortion.

Ultimately, such reforms in medical education will lead to the development of healthcare professionals who are not only skilled but also compassionate advocates for their patients' rights and well-being. This approach not only improves the support for safe abortion rights but also enriches the quality of care provided to all patients, fostering a healthcare system rooted in equality and respect for human dignity.



The Surprising Backstory behind Witch Hunts and Reproductive Labour: A Podcast

Excerpt:

Bose: Now, let's fast forward to the 1400's.

Federici: Witchcraft appears first as a form of heresy.

Bose: But there's more than meets the eye in this story. While this story is about witch hunts, it's also about controlling women's bodies for the creation of a labor market — and the creation of a peasant class in post feudal Europe.

Federici: By the 1500's, you'll have colonization. And this begins to bring silver into Europe. And the more silver comes, the more enclosures, the more people are kicked off the land, and the land is turned to commercial use.

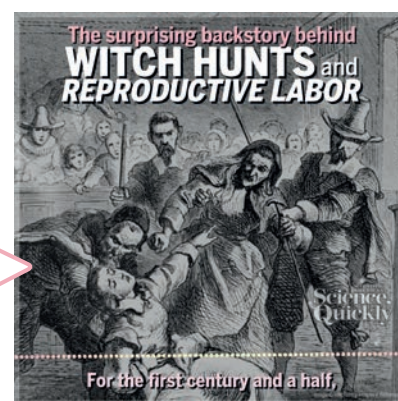
Bose: Sylvia actually argues that the creation of capitalism in Europe was a motivating factor in the rise of witch hunts. As she and other scholars have argued, expansions of capitalism also caused women to lose their social standing and their land. Particularly vulnerable were older women. By the 1600s — an edict is issued. It has to do with witches — and their apparent ability to stop reproduction.

Federici: There is a Pope that accuses witches basically of abortion and contraception.

Bose: And it's often women who were knowledgeable about reproductive health care who were targeted for witchcraft.

Federici: Women were the ones who cured. They were the ones who, in addition to farming, had the herbal garden. Because of the children because of the reproduction. They were the ones who knew about the herbs. So they were immediately suspected.

Bose: According to Sylvia, the accusation of witchcraft relied on targeting people who allegedly interfered with procreation — including abortion — because poor workers were valuable form of capital.



How Capitalism Turned Women Into Witches

Highlight Article by Jude Ellison Sady Doyle

Excerpt: Sylvia Federici's new book explains how violence against women was a necessary precondition for capitalism.

Federici's latest, [Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women](#), updates and expands the core thesis of *Caliban*, in which she argued that "witch hunts" were a way to alienate women from the means of reproduction.

In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Federici argues, there was an intervening revolutionary push toward communalism. Communalist groups often embraced "free love" and sexual egalitarianism—unmarried men and women lived together, and some communes were all-women—and even the Catholic church only punished abortion with a few years' penance.

For serfs, who tilled the land in exchange for a share of its crops, home was work, and vice versa; men and women grew the potatoes together.

But in capitalism, waged laborers have to work outside the home all the time, which means someone else needs to be at home all the time, doing the domestic work. Gender roles, and the subjugation of women, became newly necessary.

Early feudal elites in rural Europe enclosed public land, rendering it private and controllable, and patriarchy enclosed women in "private" marriages, imposing on them the reproductive servitude of bearing men's children and the emotional labor of caring for men's every need.

Pregnancy and childbirth, once a natural function, became a job that women did for their male husband-bosses—that is to say, childbirth became alienated labor.

"Witches," according to witch-hunting texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, were women who kept childbirth and pregnancy in female hands: midwives, abortionists, herbalists who provided contraception. They were killed to cement patriarchal power and create the subjugated, domestic labor class necessary for capitalism.

"The body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers," Federici writes in *Caliban*, "the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance."

The elegance of this argument, the neat way it knots together public and private, is thrilling.

"Once exorcised, denied its subversive potential through the witch hunt, female sexuality could be recuperated in a matrimonial context and for procreative ends. ...In capitalism, sex can exist but only as a productive force at the service of procreation and the regeneration of the waged/male worker and as a means of social appeasement and compensation for the misery of everyday existence."

In other words: A man can fuck his wife to produce a son and heir, and he can fuck a sex worker to blow off steam, but it serves him well to keep the sex worker criminalized and the wife dependent; both are workers, and he, as the boss, does not want them to start making demands.

See: [The Stormy Daniels–Donald Trump saga](#), or men's panicked reaction to #MeToo when the women they've treated as luxury goods start talking back.



An Interview with Primah Kwagala

Primah Kwagala is currently pursuing doctoral studies at Uganda's Makerere University in Kampala. A human rights lawyer, Chairperson emeritus of Female Lawyers in the Uganda Law Society (2019–2022), the Founding and Serving Executive Director of Women's Probono Initiative (WPI) – an organization whose vision is a Uganda free of violence and discrimination against women and girls. Primah is researching the impact of colonial legacy on women's reproductive rights in Uganda.



Q. What is the role of colonization in the criminalization of the abortion law in your country/region?

Colonization of the African region played a significant role in shaping and influencing the criminalization of abortion laws in most African countries. Abortion laws on the African Continent are a reflection of the colonial powers' legal systems at the time of colonialism. In Uganda for instance, the British introduced their law against abortion as reflected in their 1861 Offences against the Person Act. That English law prohibited administering drugs or using instruments to procure an abortion and procuring drugs or other items to cause an abortion. It only permitted medical personnel acting in good faith, with reasonable care and skill to provide surgical abortions.

Long after Uganda received Independence, that law has not changed and is still being implemented by Ugandan authorities. Even though British people have repealed that 1861 law and replaced it with more liberal laws and policies, Ugandans are stuck with implementing British conservative values and moral beliefs, including strict regulations regarding abortion.

It is noteworthy that ***traditional practices related to women's bodily autonomy were suppressed or criminalized in favor of the colonial authorities' laws and norms.*** The eventual criminalization process and demonizing of Ugandan practices around abortion led to erasure of knowledge and traditions of indigenous communities, further marginalizing local perspectives on reproductive rights and autonomy. Over time, these colonial-era laws and attitudes toward abortion have persisted in many post-colonial African societies, contributing to the continued criminalization and stigmatization of abortion.

Q. What is the importance of decolonization of the law to improve access to safe abortions?

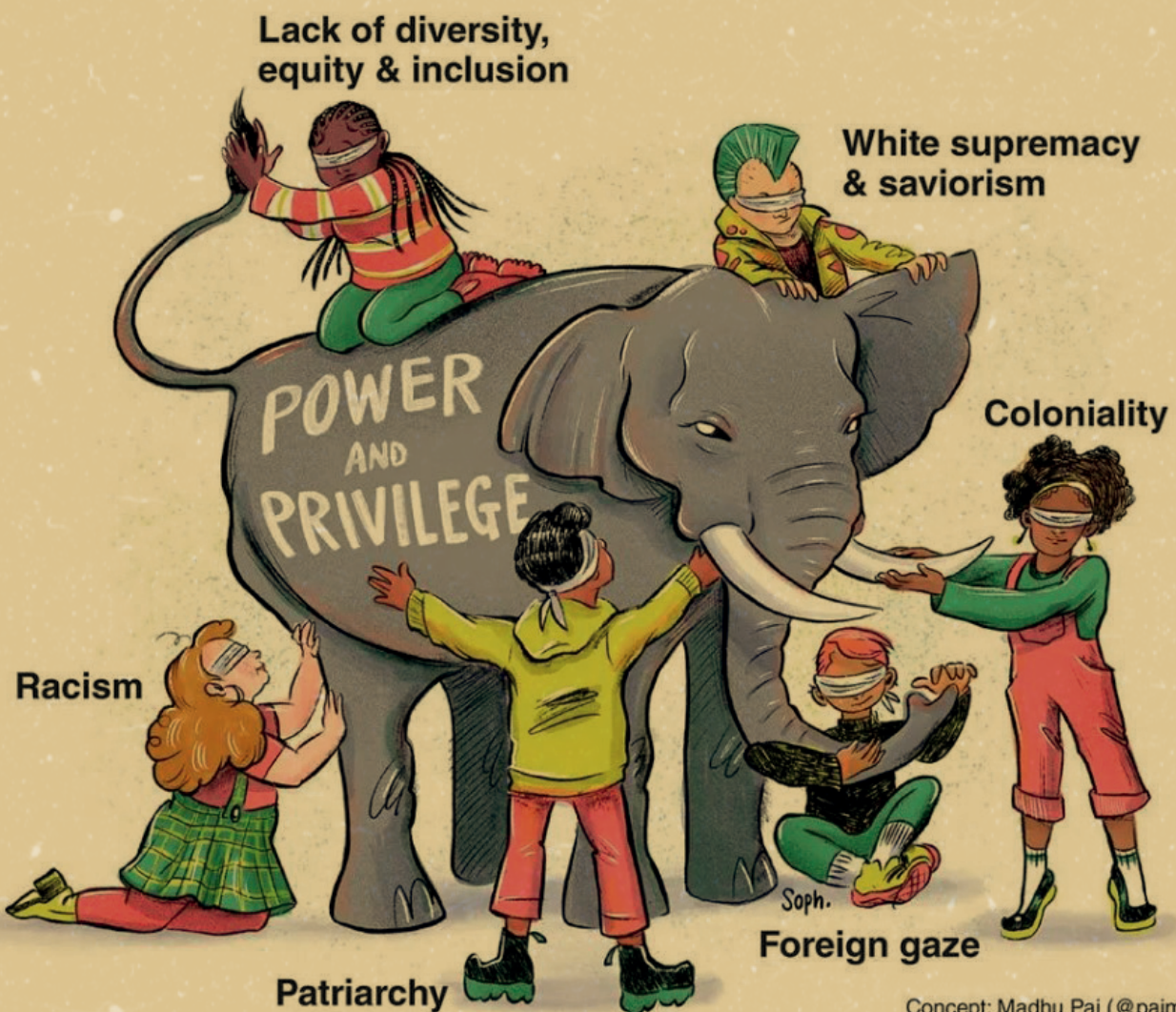
Decolonization of the law is crucial for improving access to safe abortions and promoting reproductive justice because the process involves recognizing and rectifying the historical injustices and inequalities stemming from colonial-era laws and policies. By acknowledging the negative impacts of colonization on reproductive rights and autonomy, as a community we can work towards undoing the harm and creating a more just legal framework that prioritizes the well-being and agency of individuals.

Decolonial discourses also free up space for centering indigenous knowledge, values, and perspectives on reproductive health and autonomy. By prioritizing the voices and experiences of indigenous communities, legal frameworks can be developed that better reflect the diverse needs and realities of different populations, thus improving access to comprehensive reproductive health care, including safe abortions.

Q. What is the importance of decolonization of medical education to become more supportive of safe abortion rights?

It is important to decolonise medical education to ensure that individuals that need abortion services are being taken care of by healthcare providers that are equipped to support safe abortion rights. By acknowledging and actively working to undo the legacies of colonialism, medical education can move towards providing more equitable and inclusive care, including support for safe abortion rights.

Decolonizing medical education will also enable examining power dynamics within healthcare systems, including how certain narratives, perspectives, and practices have been privileged over others. By challenging these power dynamics and centering marginalized voices and experiences, medical education can foster a more inclusive approach to abortion care that recognizes and respects the autonomy and agency of individuals seeking these services.



Concept: Madhu Pai (@paimadhu)
Art: Sophie Lane (ScEYenceStudios.com)



9 things to think about when you think of Decolonization

- 1 It is a social process even more than it is a political process.
- 2 Governance over a people changes only after the people themselves have sufficiently changed.
- 3 Decolonizing education is understood as the process in which we rethink, reframe and reconstruct the curricula and research that preserve the Europe centered colonial lens.
- 4 We work in systems that perpetuate colonial ideals and privilege Western ways of doing. For example, many student services use forms and procedures instead of first initiating a relationship with students. How libraries catalogue knowledge is colonial.
- 5 More than two decades after apartheid ended, South African university curricula remain largely Eurocentric, dominated by what some academics have called “white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews”.
- 6 Decolonizing feminism is an emerging theoretical concept, centering postcolonial feminism in a Latin American cultural, social and historical context , challenging coloniality, modernity and ascertaining that gender is a colonial construct. Maria Lugones coined the phrase in 2010 to express the idea that our society’s concept of gender was forced on people of colour through historical and continued colonialism.
- 7 Our perception of time is perhaps the most directly colonized aspect of our existence. We work to the clock, we treat our employer’s time as more valuable than our own, we allow work to spill into our private lives in so many ways. The country rhythm is dominated by the weather, by plants and animals, by all those eco-systemic processes we have been so determined to ignore. The way in which we count and measure time has been violently forced on colonized people across the world.
- 8 The majority world (sometimes capitalized as Majority World) is a term used in preference to the largely inaccurate, out-of-date and/or non-descriptive terms such as developing world, Third world, and the global ‘south’. In the early nineties, Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam began advocating for a new expression “majority world” to represent what has formerly been known as the “Third World.”
- 9 The term highlights the fact that these countries are indeed the majority of humankind. It also brings to sharp attention the anomaly that the Group of 8 countries—whose decisions affect the majority of the world’s peoples—represent a tiny fraction of humankind.

The Adivasi Writes back

By Jacinta Kerketta, Translated from Hindi by Bhumika Chawla D'Souza

They brought to us their God and said,
 'He shall redeem you from your sins.'
 'What sins have we committed?'
 We asked.
 And they were bewildered:
 How do they establish their God's existence,
 Without claims of sin and salvation?
 'Look how poor, deprived you are,' they said,
 'This is a retribution for your sins.'
 We showed them the expanse of our fields,
 Our forests, rivers, mountains and streams,
 And the heaps of grains in our granaries.
 They then said,
 'A better world awaits you after death.'
 We replied, 'There is no world after that.
 Right here, with our ancestors, we remain
 And dwell amidst our generations to come.'
 Then panic seized them,
 They knew not what to do,
 These people do not see sin.
 They do not believe in the next world,

Nor in hell or heaven.
 Now they asked us to show them our God,
 And we pointed to our mountains and trees.
 But when asked in turn
 To reveal to us their own,
 They panicked once again
 Wondering how to show their Almighty.
 One day, they had the moneylender
 Return to us our mortgaged land,
 And said, 'This is the power of our God!'
 We bowed down before that Almighty
 And remained bowed for heaven knows how long.
 With us bowed our future generations,
 And then, many a century.
 Blissfully unaware were we
 That with God they also brought weapons unseen,
 Which they used to wage wars around the world,
 In places rich in land, forests and oil.
 But how do we fight against these odds?
 We seem to have given all responsibility
 For our self-preservation to their God.



Five facts about Decolonization:

- 1 WWII was a huge catalyst for decolonization**

The war had shattered the illusion that European powers like Great Britain and France were indestructible, while Japan, which had colonized Korea, lost its power there after being defeated in 1945. Then a wave of decolonization spread across the world as countries like India, Pakistan, and Malaysia gained their independence. African colonies also gained independence from Great Britain, Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal.
- 2 Decolonization is often violent**

Colonial powers rarely leave without a fight, so violence is inevitable. In 2018, France admitted it had systematically tortured and raped people in the Algerian War of Independence that claimed as many as 1.5 million Algerian lives. Even India's independence started as a violent revolution a 100 years before the non-violent process was adopted.
- 3 Colonialism isn't over**

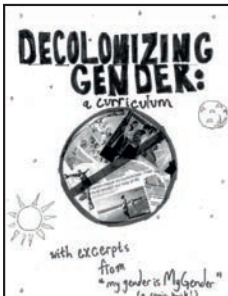
If we talk about colonialism as a thing of the past, it dismisses the reality of colonialism's ongoing impact. For example Canada continues to violate the rights of First Nations people through actions like removing, and prosecuting members of the Wet'suwet'en Nation who protested gas pipeline construction which is being built on unceded ancestral territory.
- 4 Colonialism affects climate change**

In the 1700s, British colonizers in Australia banned controlled burning, which Indigenous groups had been practicing for centuries. This is directly connected to the hugely damaging forest fires we have heard of in recent years. If you are a former colony the odds of your county being used as a dumping ground are much higher.
- 5 Decolonization can become colonized**

This often takes the form of the "white savior" mentality. Well-meaning white people all too often get caught up in wanting to do the "right thing," but they speak over and dominate groups who should be leading. A colonized decolonization process also conflates "diversity" with decolonization and fails to critically examine how power works.

Interested in reading more?

Decolonizing Gender



By Decolonizing Gender: A Curriculum

A Curriculum is a guided reflection on gender identity, race, and colonialism. Designed for both individuals and groups, this zine asks deep and probing questions about why the gender binary is seen as the “norm”, despite people who choose to exist outside of the binary having existed forever.

How did the whole world “get” two genders? The answer has more to do with colonialism and white supremacy than you might think

The Legacy of Colonialism: Law and Women’s Rights in India

By Varsha Chitnis

Extract: British feminists claimed that they, rather than English and Indian men, better understood the plight of Indian women. They claimed that by acquiring legal and political rights at home—particularly the right to vote—they would be able to better protect their native sisters. The condition of the Indian woman, particularly within the home, became the battleground on which the contests of power between Indian and British men and between British men and women were fought.

We argue that one of the post-independence legacies of this complex tussle for power is that even secular laws for women today are either protectionist and patriarchal, or else modern Indian women are not in a position to exercise their legal rights in meaningful ways.

Victorian notions of womanhood (chastity, innocence, self-effacement, and passiveness) continue to pervade some laws, and certainly the traditional training of lawmakers and judges in the British legal system allows them to bring their often patriarchal understanding of the historical foundations of these laws to bear as precedents and jurisprudential principles, even when the laws are facially egalitarian.

Two Eyed Seeing: Decolonizing Methodologies for Reproductive Justice

By Sagaree Jain

Recognize and account for the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression and colonialism that impact the freedom to choose. In 1991, Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “single-axis framework” as a way to describe how race and gender are often treated as mutually exclusive categories of experience. Throughout the process of researching and advocating SRHR issues, she incorporated an intersectional approach to understanding gender, race, and discrimination as well as the subsequent intergenerational issues affecting personal freedoms and the context in which we make SRH decisions. Decolonizing research requires recognizing that foreign researchers, while experts, are not the experts in the communities they are working in. Decolonizing research approaches requires humility, deep listening skills, and a willingness to displace your own expectations in the research process.

Decolonizing Global Health: A Moment To Reflect On A Movement

By Madhukar Pai

“According to Abimbola, what Decolonizing Global Health means will depend on where one stands; from which position one speaks; to which audience, and to what end. “As a Nigerian who was born, raised, and educated in Nigeria, my perspective of what ‘decolonizing global health’ means is different to an Indigenous or even a White Australian, or to a Nigerian who grew up in Europe or North America. We frame the problem differently; we see potential paths to a solution differently. As an academic, my perspective on DGH is different to that of a practitioner,” Abimbola explained.”

“I’m a vociferous opponent of the term decolonization, and have [written](#) about why,” said [Themrise Khan](#), a global development expert based in Pakistan. “What I am uncomfortable about is the focus being on what rich Western countries should be giving up, as opposed to what the lesser developed countries of the South should be doing to take control. There is no reason for us to continue looking to the West as the harbingers of prosperity,” she expanded.

The question, Kalinga asks, is ‘Who is decoloniality for? The colonizer or the colonized?’.

Exotic abortifacients and lost knowledge:

By Lona Shiebinger, *The Lancet*

Extract: In a moving passage in her magnificent 1705 *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) recorded how the Indian and African slave populations in Surinam, then a Dutch colony, used the seeds of a plant she identified as the *flos pavonis*, literally “peacock flower”, as an abortifacient.

“The Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters, use the seeds [of this plant] to abort their children, so that they will not become slaves like themselves. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. ...They told me this themselves.”

Although many women miscarried spontaneously as a result of the hard work, poor food, and extreme corporeal cruelty, some at least induced abortion as a deliberate, desperate act of resistance of vanquished against victor. In an economy where planters sought to breed “Negroes” as well as horses and cattle, refusal to breed became a political act.

Scarlet Letters: Getting the History of Abortion and Contraception Right

By Ranana Dine

Extract: The Puritans brought their laws on abortion from merry old England, where the procedure was also legal until quickening. Although the Puritans changed much of England’s legal system when they established their “city upon a hill,” they kept abortion as a part of Puritan family life, allowing women to choose when and if they would become mothers—whether for the first time or the fifth time.

Colonial women procured pre quickening abortions mainly with the help of other women in their communities; skilled midwives knew which herbs could cause a woman to abort, and early American medical books even gave instructions for “suppressing the courses,” or inducing an abortion.

The Limits of the Law: Abortion in the Middle East and North Africa

By Irene Maffi and Liv Tønnessen

Extract: The impact of abortion bans on women's health in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is understudied, and reliable data on unsafe abortion in countries where access to safe abortion is difficult or nonexistent are lacking.

The reason is that states where abortion is illegal do not collect data on that. Moreover, as stressed by Sarrah Shahawy in this special section, the occupied Palestinian territory is often absent from official statistics, as it is not recognized as a state.

However, a 2008 World Health Organization report estimates the yearly total of unsafe abortions to be 830,000 in Western Asia, causing 600 annual maternal deaths, and 900,000 in Northern Africa (Maghreb), causing 1,500 annual maternal deaths. Wars and displacement in the MENA region also contribute to high levels of maternal deaths (some of which are probably still related to unsafe abortion).

Detailed fieldwork-based studies on actual medical practices, political debates, local legal implementation, moral and social norms, and the trajectories of individual women in MENA countries are very rare. Most abortion laws in the region are punitive and were promulgated during the colonial period, when French and British regimes supported pronatalist policies to increase the population of the metropole and of the colonized lands.

Stolen Skin and Children Thrown: Governing sex and abortion in early modern South Asia

By Divya Cherian

Extract: What did women's bodies in pre-colonial South Asia have to do with the birth of capitalism?

South Asia's pre-colonial integration into a globally emerging, early modern capitalist order reached deep into the hinterland to transform both state and society in eighteenth-century Marwar. Driving the change was an emergent elite, consisting largely of merchants, that channelled its energies towards reshaping caste. Merchants, in alliance with Brahmans, used their influence upon the state to adjudicate the boundary between the 'illicit' and the 'licit,' generating in the process a typology and an archive of deviant sex.

In the legal framework that generated this archive, women were configured as passive recipients of sexual acts, lacking sexual personhood in law. Even as they escaped legal culpability for 'illicit' sex, women experienced, through this body of judgments, a strengthening of male proprietary controls over their bodies. Alongside, the criminalization of abortion served as a means of sexual disciplining. These findings suggest that post-Mughal, pre-colonial state formation in South Asia intersected with global economic transformations to generate new sex-caste orders and archival bodies.

“

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change...I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”

– Audre Lorde

It's time to decolonize the decolonization movement

Highlight Article by Ijeoma Nnodim Opara

Dr. Ijeoma Opara is a double-board certified Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine and Pediatrics at WSUSOM, Associate Program Director of the Internal Medicine-Pediatrics residency, and attending physician with Wayne State University Physician Group. She serves as a Section Editor for the Racism and Health Section of PLOS Global Public Health.



Editor's Note: This was the most powerful article I read on the meta level issues with decolonization! Check out the [full article](#) which unpacks the concerns so lucidly.

Extract: Is decolonization even possible especially if the same tools and systems of colonialization are employed in attempts to decolonize? Have global health actors reached down into that deep place of knowledge to touch that terror and loathing of difference?

Whose face does it wear?

How is coloniality showing up in the decolonization movement?

What this looks like is the maintenance of a power hierarchy in global health that is still predominantly white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, male, and European/American. It looks like institutional-community or (neo)colonial-(neo)colonized processes, practices, and policies of funding, partnerships, and program/project development that replicate colonial dynamics of extraction and exploitation.

It looks like curricula that re-marginalize, de-prioritize, and minimize the lived experiences, expertise, and epistemologies of indigenous communities. It looks like narratives that obscure the interdependent causative relationship of the development and wealth of Europe and North America and the under-development and poverty of their past and present colonies.

It looks like co-opting and bending the decolonization discourse to adhere to Eurocentric constraints such as viewing situations in binary terms and, therefore, in "tension" versus in multifaceted, intersectional, and in harmony.

The attempt to incorporate the disruptive violent process of undoing colonization within colonial frameworks and matrices is itself an act of colonization as it ignores the inherent intent of decolonization and presents as an unwillingness or an inability to change.

The urgency dictated by white guilt leaves little space and time for actual reflection, deconstructing, deconditioning, relationship-building, and structural dismantling.

Thus, grassroots indigenous and Majority World leaders are left in the dust, their ideas co-opted in the rush to "solutions", while colonial power paradigms and dynamics are left intact, patterns of oppression and structural injustices remaining unfettered and reinforced.

The bottom line is that the decolonization movement itself needs to be decolonized.

We cannot decolonize global health using the same logics, dynamics, and paradigms that birthed it in the first place. We cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.

This will require an imagination revolution. A liberatory mindset reset. A paradigm cataclysm.

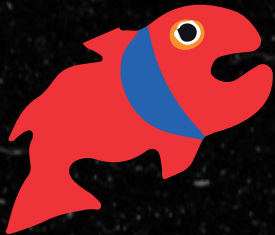
The author acknowledges with gratitude that the land she lives and works on is the original homelands of the Anishinaabe: the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi. She acknowledges the painful history of genocide and ongoing colonialism on this land of Detroit or Waawiyatanong and commits to honoring and respecting the diverse indigenous peoples, while learning how to be a better steward of the land.



-  [safeabortion_asap](#)
-  [asapasia](#)
-  [ASAPasia](#)
-  [AsiaSafeAbortionPartnership](#)



Sign up for **ASAP Academy**, a self-paced online learning platform, so we can make the movement stronger together!



Sign up here for the **Global S.A.F.E Campaign**, a global movement advocating for safe abortion rights.



NEXT ISSUE:

Volume 4 | Sept 2024

**Conscientious Objection
and Conscientious Commitment**

Guest Editor: Dr. Connie Lu