Engineering Universe for Scientific Research and Management
ISSN (Online): 2319-3069
Vol. XVIII Issue V
May 2026

GENDERED COLONIAL VIOLENCE, HISTORICAL TRAUMA AND INTERGENERATIONAL OPPRESSION

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between gendered colonial violence, historical trauma, and intergenerational oppression through a decolonial feminist framework. It argues that colonialism should not be understood solely as a past political or territorial project: its gendered logics continue through institutions, legal arrangements, racial hierarchies, cultural narratives, and unequal distributions of social power. Indigenous women and other colonised women have experienced colonial domination through the regulation of sexuality, reproductive capacity, family relations, labour, land, and cultural authority. Such violence can generate collective and historical trauma whose effects are mediated across generations through disrupted kinship networks, dispossession, poverty, racism, family separation, and the devaluation of Indigenous knowledge. Drawing on intersectional feminism, settler-colonial studies, and scholarship on historical trauma, the paper develops a conceptual account of how structural violence becomes embodied and socially reproduced. It also cautions against treating trauma as an inherent feature of Indigenous identity or reducing complex histories to individual pathology. The paper concludes that meaningful responses require Indigenous-led, culturally grounded, and structurally informed approaches that connect healing with sovereignty, justice, land, and the restoration of women's authority.

Keywords: gendered colonial violence; historical trauma; intergenerational oppression; Indigenous women; settler colonialism; decolonial feminism; intersectionality.

1. Introduction

Colonialism reorganised societies through conquest, land appropriation, racial classification, economic extraction, and the imposition of political and cultural authority. These processes were never gender-neutral. Colonial administrations and settler institutions frequently imposed

patriarchal norms, reconfigured Indigenous gender relations, and treated women's bodies, sexuality, reproductive capacities, and labour as sites through which colonial authority could be established and maintained. Gendered colonial violence therefore includes direct physical and sexual violence, but it also encompasses legal dispossession, forced assimilation, family separation, reproductive control, cultural suppression, and institutional practices that undermine women's status and collective autonomy (Behrendt, 2022; Dorries & Harjo, 2020; García-Del Moral, 2018).

This paper explores three connected concepts. Gendered colonial violence refers to coercion and structural domination shaped by the intersection of colonial power, patriarchy, race, and class. Historical trauma describes collective injuries associated with sustained or repeated historical oppression and their continuing social and psychological consequences. Intergenerational oppression concerns the ways unequal structures and their effects are reproduced across generations, even when original colonial policies have formally ended. These concepts are related but not interchangeable: historical trauma is not a biological destiny, and intergenerational effects are transmitted through social, political, cultural, familial, and material conditions rather than through a single universal mechanism (Joo-Castro & Emerson, 2021; Maxwell, 2014; Nagata et al., 2024).

The central argument is that colonial violence against women must be analysed as both a historical process and an ongoing structure. Research on Indigenous women's experiences of intimate partner violence demonstrates how residential schools, family disruption, and colonial governance shape contemporary experiences, while also showing why individualised explanations are inadequate (Ogden & Tutty, 2023; Behrendt, 2022). Recent scholarship further argues that the field of violence-against-women research itself must interrogate colonial hierarchies in knowledge production, funding, and intervention design (Lokot et al., 2024).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Decolonial feminism and the colonial organisation of gender

Decolonial feminist analysis challenges the assumption that gender relations can be understood independently of colonial histories. Colonial power did not simply encounter pre-existing gender systems; in many contexts it reclassified, subordinated, or transformed them. The imposition of European legal and religious norms, property regimes, and administrative categories could privilege

male authority, marginalise women's political roles, and redefine Indigenous social relations through colonial ideas of civilisation and respectability. Behrendt (2022) explains how settler-colonial gender practices disrupted generational patterns of gender roles and power relations in Indigenous communities. Ultreras Villagrana et al. (2023) similarly show that coloniality shapes gendered lives, family dynamics, social arrangements, and political structures within Wixárika communities.

A decolonial approach also resists treating Indigenous women as a homogeneous category. Experiences are shaped by nationhood, community, class, age, sexuality, disability, geography, and the particular history of colonial rule. Intersectional analysis is therefore essential: gender is constituted through relations with race and colonial power rather than functioning as an isolated variable. García-Del Moral (2018) argues that violence against Indigenous women in Canada requires a decolonial intersectional account of feminicide, while Sabsay (2025) revisits the coloniality of gender through anti-colonial feminist and trans* perspectives and the relationship between body and territory.

2.2 Historical trauma as collective and structural injury

Historical trauma frameworks draw attention to the cumulative consequences of collective experiences such as dispossession, forced removal, cultural suppression, violence, and the destruction of social institutions. These histories may shape present-day wellbeing through grief, disrupted relationships, loss of language and land, institutional mistrust, and persistent socioeconomic inequality. Joo-Castro and Emerson (2021), in a scoping review of 75 publications, identify the need to distinguish historical from contemporary trauma and to clarify how intergenerational transmission is defined and measured. Thomas et al. (2023) describe pathways through which settler-colonial structures and ideologies may become embodied and influence health outcomes.

The concept must nevertheless be used critically. Maxwell (2014) warns that transgenerational transmission discourse has a complex intellectual and political history and can inadvertently reproduce colonial pathologisation of Indigenous family life. Nagata et al. (2024) review the benefits, limitations, and complexities of ethnoracial historical-trauma research, including the need to examine different mechanisms and contexts. Mutuyimana and Maercker (2023) likewise identify

conceptual and measurement gaps in the historical-trauma literature. A rigorous account therefore avoids suggesting that trauma is inherited in a simple, automatic, or biologically predetermined manner.

2.3 Intergenerational oppression and structural continuity

Intergenerational oppression describes the continuation of disadvantage and constrained agency through institutions and relationships across generations. Its mechanisms may include unequal access to land and resources, racialised labour markets, discriminatory legal systems, child-removal policies, barriers to education and healthcare, intergenerational poverty, and the weakening of cultural and linguistic transmission. Cromer et al. (2018) distinguish historical-loss awareness, institutional betrayal, and family-system pathways in the American Indian experience. Veronese et al. (2023), studying three generations of Palestinian refugees, connect transgenerational trauma with collective resilience under settler-colonial violence. These studies demonstrate the importance of context-specific analysis rather than assuming a single model of transmission.

3. Gendered Forms of Colonial Violence

3.1 Control of bodies, sexuality, and reproduction

Colonial regimes have frequently made women's bodies central to projects of racial ordering and social control. Sexual violence, reproductive coercion, regulation of marriage, and the policing of sexuality can function not only as interpersonal acts but also as expressions of broader relations of domination. BlackDeer (2023) places Indigenous reproductive justice within the policy landscape of settler colonialism, showing why trauma-focused work must be connected to collective and structural conditions. McKenzie et al. (2022) document Indigenous women's resistance to reproductive coercion in healthcare and social-service settings, including practices involving sterilisation, contraception, and abortion. Murdock and Durant (2025) further analyse midwifery and reproductive healthcare as sites where colonial power can be reproduced.

These accounts require an understanding of reproductive justice that extends beyond individual choice to include the conditions in which choices are made: access to safe care, freedom from coercion, family and community integrity, and Indigenous sovereignty. Research on Indigenous

reproductive justice underscores the entanglement of reproductive control with settler-colonial power and the importance of Indigenous sovereignty (BlackDeer, 2023; McKenzie et al., 2022).

3.2 Dispossession, labour, and cultural disruption

Land dispossession undermines more than economic security. It can disrupt subsistence practices, ceremonial responsibilities, kinship networks, and the places through which cultural knowledge is transmitted. Women may experience these changes through the loss of livelihood, diminished authority, intensified unpaid care work, and exclusion from decision-making. Hunt (2025) uses Indigenous feminism and legal geography to examine Indigenous women's role in land governance and the gendered dimensions of territorial dispossession. Dorries and Harjo (2020) argue that safety planning must address the social and political causes of Indigenous women's vulnerability rather than focusing only on physical space.

3.3 State violence, family separation, and institutional control

Forced assimilation, child removal, residential or boarding-school systems, and state intervention into family life have produced profound disruptions in caregiving, language, identity, and community continuity in different colonial contexts. Ogden and Tutty (2023), drawing on interviews and secondary analysis involving 40 Indigenous women in the Canadian prairie provinces, report participants' accounts connecting residential-school histories and family disruption with intimate partner violence. García-Del Moral (2025) analyses state complicity in violence against Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls through both institutional action and inaction. Such evidence indicates that state violence is not limited to explicit coercive acts; failures of protection and accountability can also reproduce colonial vulnerability.

4. Historical Trauma and Intergenerational Transmission

Intergenerational consequences emerge through multiple interacting pathways. At the material level, dispossession and exclusion can constrain access to housing, education, healthcare, employment, and political participation. At the relational level, family separation, violence, grief, and institutional surveillance may strain caregiving relationships and community networks. At the cultural level, language suppression and restrictions on ceremony or knowledge transmission may weaken connections to identity and place. At the institutional level, discriminatory policies can

reproduce the conditions that originally generated harm (Joo-Castro & Emerson, 2021; Thomas et al., 2023).

These pathways are neither uniform nor inevitable. Families and communities also transmit resilience, resistance, cultural knowledge, political memory, and strategies of survival. Veronese et al. (2023) explicitly connect transgenerational trauma with collective resilience, while McKenzie et al. (2022) document Indigenous women's active strategies of refusal, negotiation, and knowledge-sharing in the face of reproductive coercion. Brave Heart et al. (2011) situate historical trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas within collective histories of loss, discrimination, and oppression, while emphasising the importance of culturally grounded clinical and community responses.

A distinction is required between the transmission of trauma and the reproduction of oppression. Trauma may refer to emotional, relational, and collective consequences of violence; oppression refers to systems that distribute power and resources unequally. The two can reinforce one another, but they are not identical. A community may experience historical grief while also confronting present-day legal and economic dispossession. Accordingly, therapeutic responses alone cannot remedy structural injustice, just as policy reform that ignores lived experience may fail to address the human consequences of historical violence (Maxwell, 2014; Nagata et al., 2024; Mutuyimana & Maercker, 2023).

5. Contemporary Manifestations and the Politics of Representation

Contemporary gendered violence can reflect the continuing effects of colonial power through unequal protection, institutional neglect, criminalisation, and the normalisation of racialised stereotypes. García-Del Moral (2018) demonstrates the importance of interpreting violence against Indigenous women through a decolonial and intersectional framework. Behrendt (2022) similarly argues that explanations of intimate partner violence in Indigenous communities should account for settler-colonial policies, historical disruptions of gender relations, and limits on Indigenous sovereignty. Research on Indigenous reproductive and family justice connects contemporary harms to the historical operation of patriarchal colonial power.

Representation is another arena in which colonial power persists. Public and academic narratives may depict Indigenous women primarily as victims, treat violence as a cultural defect, or detach

contemporary harms from the histories and policies that helped produce them. Such accounts risk shifting responsibility away from institutions and obscuring Indigenous women's intellectual, political, and community leadership. Lokot et al. (2024), in a scoping review, call for bottom-up approaches that scrutinise structural inequities and the hierarchies embedded in knowledge production, research funding, and programming.

6. Decolonial Responses: Healing, Sovereignty, and Structural Change

Decolonial responses must move beyond interventions that locate the problem exclusively within individual women, families, or communities. First, services should be Indigenous-led and accountable to the communities they serve. This includes respecting local knowledge systems, community-defined priorities, language, cultural protocols, and Indigenous legal traditions. Second, healing must be connected to material and political justice. Access to safe housing, healthcare, education, economic resources, land, and effective legal protection is essential. Where violence is sustained by institutional arrangements, individual counselling cannot substitute for institutional accountability (BlackDeer, 2023; Lokot et al., 2024).

Third, research should be conducted through ethical partnerships that recognise Indigenous sovereignty over knowledge, data, interpretation, and dissemination. Lokot et al. (2024) stress the need to decolonise the full research process rather than merely adding Indigenous participants to externally controlled projects. Fourth, Indigenous women should be recognised not only as survivors but also as knowledge producers, leaders, organisers, caregivers, and agents of political change. The scholarship on Indigenous resistance to reproductive coercion and feminist planning demonstrates the importance of centring women's strategies and community authority (Dorries & Harjo, 2020; McKenzie et al., 2022).

7. Conclusion

Gendered colonial violence, historical trauma, and intergenerational oppression are interconnected dimensions of enduring colonial power. Colonial domination has operated through bodily violence and through the transformation of land relations, family structures, gender systems, cultural authority, and state institutions. Its effects can continue across generations when material inequalities, institutional discrimination, family disruption, and cultural dispossession remain in

place. Yet these effects should never be treated as inevitable or as evidence of inherent dysfunction within Indigenous communities.

A decolonial feminist analysis therefore requires a dual focus: it must recognise the depth of historical and intergenerational harm while identifying the contemporary structures that reproduce it. It must also foreground Indigenous women's agency, leadership, knowledge, and sovereignty. The most meaningful responses combine culturally grounded healing with institutional accountability, material redistribution, legal recognition, and community-led self-determination. Confronting colonial violence is not only a matter of remembering historical injustice; it is a continuing political and ethical commitment to transforming the conditions that allow oppression to persist.

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