

## **Seminar Title: Gender, Representations, and Digital Media: Reclaiming Empowerment by Marginalized Communities**

### **Course Description:**

This seminar introduces key concepts for understanding gender, representation, and empowerment in the age of digital media. Women from war-torn regions such as Syria are frequently portrayed in English-language media and scholarship as passive victims in need of rescue, while refugee men are often framed as threatening figures or potential security risks. These reductive and racialized representations erase historical, political, and social agency, while reinforcing global hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South.

The course examines how marginalized communities—particularly Syrian women—challenge and resist these dominant narratives by strategically using digital media to reclaim agency, assert dignity, and foster collective empowerment. Through intersectional and decolonial feminist frameworks, participants will critically explore how media representations are shaped by race, gender, coloniality, war, and migration.

The seminar also interrogates neoliberal and corporate appropriations of “empowerment,” which often individualize structural inequalities and promote market-friendly narratives of resilience and self-improvement. In contrast, the course foregrounds bottom-up digital practices of resistance, counter-discourse, collective care, and community-building developed by marginalized communities themselves.

By the end of the seminar, participants will develop a critical understanding of how media narratives construct victimhood, threat, and deservingness, while exploring how digital spaces can become sites of resistance, healing, self-representation, and collective empowerment.

### **Key focus areas include:**

- Gendered and racialized media representations of marginalized communities.
- Intersectional and decolonial feminist approaches to digital media and empowerment.
- Digital media as a space for agency, resistance, and self-representation.
- Counter-discourse, collective healing, and community-building among displaced communities.
- Orientalism, securitization, and hierarchies of victimhood in public discourse.

### **Seminar Objectives and Skills for Participants:**

1. Apply intersectional and decolonial feminist frameworks to examine digital media, empowerment, and resistance.
2. Critically analyze media representations of marginalized communities in relation to gender, race, war, and migration.
3. Identify and challenge reductive, gendered narratives that portray refugee women as passive victims and refugee men as threats.
4. Understand digital media as a tool of agency, dignity, community-building, and collective healing among marginalized communities.

### **Format:**

90-minute weekly sessions (including lectures, guest speakers, discussions, and group activities).

Audience: General public: no academic background required.

Materials: All readings distributed as PDFs.

### **WEEK 1 –**

## Introduction: Decolonizing knowledge on Gender, Representations, and Digital Media: Who Produces Knowledge and Whose Voices are Heard?

### Objectives:

- ☐ Understand how knowledge production in media and academia is shaped by race and coloniality.
- ☐ Introduce decolonial feminist approaches to communication studies.
- ☐ Reflect on whose voices are centered or excluded in discussions of gender and media.

### Suggested reading:

- Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain (2018). “#CommunicationSoWhite.” *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 254–266.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy003>
- Eden Renee Ng, Patricia Hill Collins, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Treva B. Lindsey (2020). “#CommunicationSoWhite: Race and Power in the Academy and Beyond.” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 13(2), 143–151.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcaa011>

### Further Reading:

- Stuart Hall (2019 [1977]). “The Hinterland of Science: Ideology and the Sociology of Knowledge.” In David Morley (Ed.), *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies* (pp. 111–138). Duke University Press.

**Guest speaker:** Shaza al-Rihawi (Digital creator and researcher at Lifbi Leibniz Institut für Bildungsforschung e.V.)

**Activity:** Can digital media challenge dominant systems of knowledge and representation, or does it sometimes reproduce them?

## Gender and Victimizing Representations: Why Are Marginalized Communities Portrayed as Passive and Powerless?

### Objectives:

- ☐ Examine how gender shapes media representations of refugees and marginalized communities.
- ☐ Analyze how women are frequently portrayed as passive victims while men are often framed as threats or security risks.
- ☐ Critically explore how race, gender, and power intersect in victimizing and securitized narratives.
- ☐ Understand how media representations influence public perception, policy, and social attitudes toward displaced communities.

### Suggested reading:

- Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei (2001). "Refugees, Race, and Gender: The Multiple Discrimination against Refugee Women." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 19(6), 21–32.
- Nora Bloch (2022). "Is a Woman a Better Refugee Than a Man? Gender Representations of Refugees in the Polish Public Debate." *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny*, 48(1), 53–70.

### Further reading:

- Joan Wallach Scott (1986). "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053–1075.

**Activity:** How can media represent suffering without reproducing victimization or fear?

## Gender and Empowerment: Who Defines Empowerment and why?

### Objectives:

- ☐ Explore different definitions and understandings of empowerment in relation to gender and social inequality.
- ☐ Examine the relationship between agency, choice, resources, and structural power.
- ☐ Critically analyze who defines empowerment and whose interests these definitions may serve.
- ☐ Reflect on how experiences of war, displacement, race, and patriarchy shape understandings of empowerment.

### Suggested Reading:

- Naila Kabeer (1999). "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.

### Further Readings:

- Naila Kabeer (2019). "Women's Empowerment and the Question of Choice." *Journal of International Affairs*, 72(2), 209–214.
- Katty Alhayek (2016). "ICTs, Agency, and Gender in Syrian Activists' Work among Syrian Refugees in Jordan." *Gender, Technology and Development*, 20(3), 333–351.

**Activity:** How might experiences of war, displacement, gender, or race affect people's understanding of empowerment?

## **WEEK 4 –**

Co-opting empowerment: How Have Institutions and Corporations Redefined Empowerment?

### **Objectives:**

- ☐ Critically examine how institutions, NGOs, and corporations use and redefine the language of empowerment.
- ☐ Understand how neoliberal approaches to empowerment can individualize structural inequalities.
- ☐ Analyze the depoliticization and commercialization of feminist ideas and resistance.
- ☐ Explore the tensions between collective liberation and market-friendly narratives of self-improvement.

### **Suggested reading:**

- Andrea Cornwall (2016). “Beyond ‘Empowerment Lite’: Women’s Empowerment, Neoliberal Development and Global Justice.” *Cadernos Pagu*, 52, 1–31.

### **Further reading:**

- Srilatha Batliwala (2007). “Taking the Power out of Empowerment – An Experiential Account.” *Development in Practice*, 17(4–5), 557–565.

**Activity:** Does the campaign challenge systems of power or adapt people to them?

## **WEEK 5 –**

Digital Media and Agency: How Do Marginalized Communities Reclaim Voice and Visibility Online?

### **Objectives:**

- ☐ Explore how digital media can function as spaces of agency and resistance.

- ☐ Analyze the relationship between platform structures and marginalized self-representation.
- ☐ Examine tensions between visibility, surveillance, and empowerment.

**Suggested reading:**

- Radhika Gajjala (2007). “Shifting Frames: Race, Ethnicity, and Intercultural Communication in Online Social Networking and Virtual Work.” *An Interrupted Postcolonial/Feminist Cyberethnography*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 7(3), 335–350.

**Further reading:**

- Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanese (Eds.). (2024). *Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday*. Amsterdam University Press.

**Activity:** Provide examples of digital content created by marginalized communities, such as: social media posts, activist campaigns, blogs, digital storytelling projects, podcasts, or online community initiatives. Choose examples that foreground: self-representation, resistance, identity, or community-building.

**WEEK 6 –**

Digital Counter-Discourse and Healing: How Do Marginalized Communities Use Digital Media for Resistance and Collective Care?

**Objectives:**

- ☐ Examine how marginalized communities use digital media to challenge harmful and victimizing narratives.
- ☐ Explore the role of counter-discourse in reclaiming dignity, voice, and collective agency.
- ☐ Understand how digital spaces can foster solidarity, emotional support, and collective healing.

☐ Critically reflect on the relationship between resistance, care, and empowerment in online spaces.

### **Suggested reading**

- Katty Alhayek (2025). “Digital Empowering Positivity: Syrian Women’s Counter-Discourse for Resistance and Healing.” *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 1–15.

### **Further reading:**

- Kishonna L. Gray and B. Adeyemo (2021). “Not ‘Falling for the Okey-Doke’: #BlackLivesMatter as Resistance to Disinformation in Online Communities.” *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(5), 868–871.

**Activity:** Can online spaces foster collective healing?

## **WEEK 7 –**

Ethics and Decolonial Research: How Should Marginalized Communities be Represented and Studied?

### **Objectives:**

- ☐ Examine the ethical challenges involved in researching marginalized and displaced communities.
- ☐ Understand how power relations shape knowledge production and representation in academic and digital research.
- ☐ Critically reflect on colonial and extractive research practices and their impact on vulnerable communities.
- ☐ Explore decolonial approaches to research that emphasize collaboration, accountability, and reciprocity.

**Suggested reading:**

- Katty Alhayek and Basilues Zeno (2023). “Decolonizing Displacement Research: Between Autoethnography as a Method of Resistance.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 55(3), 548–555.

**Further reading:**

- Andrew Thompson, Lindsay Stringfellow, Mairi Maclean, and Abeer Nazzal (2021). “Ethical Considerations and Challenges for Using Digital Ethnography to Research Vulnerable Populations.” *Journal of Business Research*, 124, 676–683.
- Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books. Chapter 9, Chapter 10, and Conclusion (pp. 163–200).

**Activity:** Can research about marginalized communities ever be fully neutral, or is all knowledge production shaped by power relations?

**WEEK 8 –**

Gender and Digital Repression: How Is Gender Weaponized Through Digital Transnational Repression?

**Objectives:**

- ☐ Examine how digital technologies are used to surveil, intimidate, and silence marginalized communities across borders.
- ☐ Analyze the gendered dimensions of digital transnational repression and online violence.
- ☐ Understand the relationship between digital visibility, activism, surveillance, and vulnerability.
- ☐ Explore how states and other actors weaponize gender through online harassment, monitoring, and intimidation.

**Suggested reading:**

- Noura Aljizawi et al. (2024). No Escape: The Weaponization of Gender for the Purposes of Digital Transnational Repression. Read Section 3 (pp. 18–48) and Section 6: Policy Recommendations. Published by Citizen Lab, University of Toronto.

### **Further reading:**

- Ronald J. Deibert (2020). Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society. House of Anansi Press.

**Guest speaker:** Noura Aljizawi (Senior Researcher at the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy.)

**Activity:** How can marginalized communities remain politically visible and active online while navigating surveillance, repression, and digital violence?

## **WEEK 9 –**

Media Narratives, Security, and the Politics of Fear: How Refugee Representations are Racialized and Securitized through Media Discourse.

### **Objectives:**

- ☐ Identify how media narratives construct refugees as threats.
- ☐ Analyze the relationship between gender, race, and securitization.
- ☐ Understand how fear-based discourse reinforces borders and exclusion.
- ☐ Critically examine how refugee masculinity is racialized.

### **Suggested reading:**

- Ahmad Barakat (2024). “The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Global Security Threats – A Case Study of Germany.” The University of St Andrews, 15(2) (2023). Available at: <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/2730>

**Further reading:**

- Stuart Hall (1981). "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media." In George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt (Eds.), *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties* (pp. 28–52). Lawrence and Wishart.

**Activity:** Compare humanitarian portrayals of women, securitised portrayals of men, and discuss how both remove agency in different ways.

**WEEK 10 –**

Hierarchies of Victimhood and Reclaiming Representation: Why are Some Victims Considered more “worthy” of Sympathy than Others? How Do Colonial and Racial Logics Shape Public Empathy and Media Visibility?

**Objectives:**

- ☐ Examine how Orientalist frameworks shape humanitarian discourse.
- ☐ Understand the concept of “hierarchies of victims.”
- ☐ Analyze comparative refugee representations across geopolitical contexts.
- ☐ Reflect on strategies for reclaiming dignity and narrative agency.

**Suggested reading:**

- Ahmad Barakat (2026). *Orientalism and Hierarchy of Victims*. *The Journal of Communication and Media Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2470-9247/cgp/a135>
- Ahmad Barakat (2021). "The Images of Syrian Refugees in the Mainstream Narrative – Case Study of Lebanon." *The University of St Andrews*, 12(1), 203–229. Available at: <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/2170>

**Further reading:**

- Lila Abu-Lughod (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press.

**Activity:** How might marginalized communities challenge these narratives online?

### **Course Conclusion:**

This course is a critical examination of how media, political discourse, and digital technologies shape public understandings of gender, displacement, victimhood, and security. Throughout the course, participants explore how marginalized communities are often represented through reductive and racialized narratives that portray refugee women as passive victims and refugee men as threats, while erasing agency, complexity, and historical context.

Drawing on intersectional and decolonial feminist approaches, the seminar highlights how marginalized communities—particularly Syrian women—use digital media not only to resist dominant representations, but also to reclaim dignity, foster collective care, and build alternative forms of knowledge and empowerment. Participants are encouraged to engage critically with questions of representation, securitization, surveillance, ethics, and hierarchies of victimhood, while reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of digital spaces as sites of resistance and self-representation.

Ultimately, the course encourages participants to rethink whose voices are heard, whose suffering is recognized, and how more ethical, inclusive, and decolonial forms of media representation and knowledge production can be imagined and practiced.