Finding Assistance, Delivering Outreach

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| Module 1 |

Understanding Gender-Based Violence

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Description of the module

This module introduces core concepts—sex, gender, gender roles, stereotypes, and the binary system—and examines the sex-gender system and power-based relations that underpin gender-based violence. Learners will explore GBV's diverse forms, how social norms enable it, and the contexts where it occurs

What will I Learn ?

1. Define and distinguish core concepts: sex, gender, gender roles, stereotypes, and the binary system.
2. Explain the sex-gender system and how power-based relations produce and sustain inequality.
3. Identify the main forms and expressions of gender-based violence
4. Recognize common settings and situational risk factors where GBV occurs.
5. Apply an intersectional and decolonial lens to analyse how race, class, disability, age, and migration shape experiences of GBV.
6. Analyse how stereotypes, gender binarism, and compulsory heterosexuality legitimize and reproduce violence.
7. Reflect critically on one's own assumptions and practices to promote safer, more inclusive environments.
8. Detect early warning signs and everyday manifestations of GBV and gendered exclusion.

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1. Understanding the foundations of Gender

1.1. Gender

Gender is the psychological, behavioural and cultural characteristics that are socially developed and context-related, associated with masculinity or femininity. It refers to the way that society defines how people should be and behave according to their biological sex. **Gender assignment** is a process that takes place in our society from the moment a child is born, and it is based on the newborn's sexual characteristics. For example, if the newborn has a vulva, it is labelled "girl"; and if it has a penis, it is labelled "boy." These two labels are not neutral but have clear social and cultural connotations, assigning to each of them roles, attributes and expectations that define and associate the categories Male-Men and Female-Women (Coll-Planas, 2016). The ideas around gender are rooted in the culture, history, tradition and the development of a social order based on stereotypes, with clear functions differentiated by sex and rooted in the construction of the sexual division of labour. When talking about gender, it is not exclusively referred to women but rather about the construction that is socially developed over people's bodies, and the relationships that are established within the framework of the sex-gender system.

These are the dimensions of gender:

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Relational

Gender is not an innate characteristic of a person, as it is understood to be a **relationship between individuals**, which locates men in a position of power and women and other identities in a position of subordination.

Asymmetric/Hierarchical

The differences it establishes between women and men are not neutral; they attach **greater importance and value to** the characteristics and activities associated with **the masculine** while dismissing the characteristics and activities expected from women, and produce unequal power relations.

Changing

Roles and relationships change over time and space, according to the social context, to the expectations about men's and women's roles along the life cycle, although keeping their hierarchical characteristics.

Contextual

There are **variations** in gender relations and classifications **according to ethnicity, class, culture, etc**. In this sense, there are cultures that live gender differently, as evidenced by the existence of the third gender in Thailand, the muxes in Mexico or the Kuchus of Uganda. Likewise, societies construct different specific expectations around identities, roles, and gender stereotypes. What is considered to be **feminine or masculine may change contextually** in terms of physical expression, clothes, behaviours, attitudes and behaviours but the expression of signs socially associated with femininity and masculinity serves to hierarchize women and men.

Institutionally structured

It refers not only to the relationships between women and men on a personal and private level, but to a **social system** that is based on institutional values, legislation, religion, and so on.

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1.2. Sex

Sex is a flexible **spectrum** of possibilities that can change. The category of sex is closely related to biological processes that lead to **sexual differentiation**. This macroprocess is marked by other processes of genetic, hormonal, anatomical and functional nature. All these spheres of a person's development serve medical science to define the sex with which the individual was born, determined by chromosomes, genitals, hormones, reproductive system and gonads. This means that with a person's sex we can only define their biological characteristics. Therefore, we cannot know what the person feels, how they **self-identify** around these characteristics, nor can we expect any kind of associated behaviour or assume which people they will be attracted to. Similarly, the classification of these sexual characteristics into **two static, exclusive and medically predefined categories** (**male/female**) must also be questioned, given that the diversity of corporealities and the multiplicity of expressions that sexual characteristics adopt do not always fall into either of these two categories. The doctor in biology, Anne Fausto Sterling (2006), for example, exposed in a provocative article that, given the biological diversity and the multiple combinations of sexual characteristics that occur in human bodies, biological sciences could **define up to 5 sexes, beyond the 2** that are accepted as medically valid. With this proposal, she wanted to highlight the fact that anatomical sex is present in nature as a continuous distribution of different combinations, and that the construction and definition of the category sex is also closely linked to social and cultural signifiers. In this sense, intersexuality refers to a body with variations in sexual characteristics considered atypical, taking as a reference the sexed bodies considered male or female. An intersex body is defined whose sexual characteristics do not fit into the typical configuration of what is defined as a male body or a female body. It does not mean having female and male sexual characteristics at the same time, but rather that the body exhibits a set of sexual characteristics that do not fit into the typical definition of binary sexes. **Both sex and gender** are ways of describing people and **are based on social constructions**. While it is true that this system makes it easier to understand or define a part of the population, it is important to note that it is also used to discriminate and limit another part.

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1.3. Gender roles

Gender roles are considered to be those roles that are **socially expected from men and women**, according to the socially developed stereotypes explained before. If women are stereotyped as fragile and emotional they are expected to adopt social roles that don't imply leadership skills, for example. On the side of men and masculinity, if the stereotype is that men are fast decision-makers they are expected to adopt social roles connected to leadership. These roles are also responsible for positioning women in places of subordination in the public sphere as well as in private relations, being **adopted with little questioning and internalized as natural**.

1.4. Gender stereotypes and binarism

Gender stereotypes are general opinions and prejudices about attributes or characteristics that men and women possess or should possess and the social functions that both perform or should perform. They are **cultural constructions** that prescribe **what men and women should be and do**. From early childhood, these messages are transmitted and reinforced by families, schools, media, religion, and even by policies and laws, shaping the way people perceive themselves and others. They function as normative frameworks that reward behaviors aligned with the expected roles—such as boys being assertive or girls being caring—and **punish those that transgress them**. In doing so, stereotypes confine women to reproductive and domestic responsibilities, and men to productive and public roles, sustaining an unequal distribution of power and resources. The following table summarizes these stereotypes and expectations from the two socially constructed genders in our Western society:

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Stereotypes about masculinity	Stereotypes about femininity
• Men are strong and don't cry • Better at sports • Braver • Clear thinkers • Rational • Dominant • Strategic	• Vulnerable • Delicate and sweet • Fragile • Fearful • Emotional • Submissive • Maternal
Expected male roles	**Expected female roles**
• Economic provider • Good leader • Responsibility roles • Public sphere roles • Productive activities • Political roles • Decision-makers	• Caregiving roles • Subordinated roles • Little responsibility roles • Reproductive activities • Relational roles • Accommodating roles

Table extracted from https://cutallties.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/English_CBT.pdf the 29th August 2025

Closely connected to this is the principle of gender binarism, the idea that there are **only two, fixed, and opposite genders**—male/man and female/woman. The relationship between stereotypes and binarism is therefore mutually reinforcing. Stereotypes gain **legitimacy** because they appear to derive from **"natural" binary categories of sex and gender**. At the same time, the binary framework remains unquestioned because stereotypes reproduce it daily in the way we raise children, structure education, design workplaces, and even regulate citizenship and rights. Together, they constitute a symbolic and material apparatus that naturalizes male dominance and sustains multiple forms of gender-based violence. For example, stereotypes that represent men as rational leaders and wage gaps,

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occupational segregation, and the underrepresentation of women in politics. The binary model that **defines masculinity in opposition to femininity** legitimizes homophobia and transphobia, while reinforcing the idea that heterosexuality is the only valid relational model.

2. Power, Gender, and the Structures of Violence

2.1. Sex-gender system and power-based relations

The previously explained binary model is not simply descriptive; it acts as a foundational mechanism of the sex-gender system. As feminist theorist Gayle Rubin (1986) argued, **biological sex is given cultural meaning** through this framework, **creating a hierarchical order where women and feminized bodies are subordinated**. The binary division not only excludes the existence of trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse people, but also rigidifies the roles of those categorized as male or female, making deviation from these norms socially costly.

Seen in this light, gender inequality is not the inevitable result of biological differences, but the **outcome of a system of cultural meanings and power relations that rely on stereotypes and binarism to reproduce hierarchies**. Breaking these mechanisms requires questioning not only the roles assigned to men and women, but also the very Western binary structure on which they rest. In this way, the **cultural subordination of women, feminized bodies and of those who deviate from normative roles** is explained by the network of meanings and social relationships attributed to biological sex. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) had already warned that gender articulates the construction of sexual difference, through which the social positions occupied by women and men are defined, characterized by inequality and hierarchy. For example, the concepts of masculinity or femininity refer to practices, attitudes, behaviors and expectations assigned to men or women. These are often

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presented as "natural" and therefore legitimized by society—for example, the belief that men are more rational or that women are naturally better caregivers. Such ideas are not universal truths, but rather **social norms reinforced through education, media, religion, laws, and everyday customs**. Because they are socially legitimized, many people accept them without questioning. At the same time, these attitudes, practices, behaviors and expectations are **negotiated and modified within each social and historical context**. What it means to "be a man" or "be a woman" varies across cultures and changes over time. Even within the same society, people challenge and reshape these expectations—for instance, when men take on caregiving roles or women enter traditionally male professions.

Building on this, Raewyn Connell (1995) describes **gender as a hierarchical structure of social practice**, where dominant positions (men) are maintained through the existence of subordinate positions. In this view, inequality is not only about who holds power, but also about how the system of subordination itself sustains the broader regime of gender inequalities. These dynamics are what we call power-based relations: social relations organized around asymmetries of power, where certain groups or identities hold authority, legitimacy, and resources, while others are systematically marginalized or subordinated. This binary system generates a **whole system of exclusions** that affects people who do not comply with these patterns (Coll-Planas, 2016). This is the case, for example, of intersex people -who are born with sexual characteristics that do not fit into the binary male/female categories that medical science has established-, and transgender people, who do not conform to the gender assigned when they were born. This system also excludes people who express their gender in a way that does not follow the hegemonic patterns of masculinity and femininity, such as boys with a "feminine" gender expression or "masculine" girls. They may face mockery, exclusion, or violence. Similarly, trans and non-binary people are often pressured to adapt their bodies or appearances to fit binary expectations. In this context, it is important to stress that changing one's body or appearance does not mean that the body is wrong. In fact, all people modify their bodies at some point: shaving, using makeup, dyeing hair, cosmetic surgery, or other

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forms of self-styling. The issue is not change itself, but the pressure of the sex-gender system that pushes people to adapt to rigid ideals instead of relating to their bodies from freedom, care, and wellbeing.

People whose desires do not conform to heterosexual norms —lesbians, gays, bisexuals, pansexuals, asexuals, among others— are also subject to exclusion within this system. At its core, the sex-gender system insists that sex is immutable, natural, and objective, tying it to chromosomes, genitals, and secondary sexual characteristics. Within this framework, heterosexuality is not simply treated as one possible form of desire but as the "normal" and legitimate one. Adrienne Rich (1985) coined the term **compulsory heterosexuality** to describe how, from an early age, we are taught that attraction between men and women is the natural standard. Yet for Rich, heterosexuality is more than a cultural expectation: it operates as a political regime. This means that it is upheld by cultural, legal, political, and economic institutions —such as marriage, family, kinship systems, and the sexual division of labor— which together structure social life. As a result, **heterosexuality is positioned not as a choice but as the central norm that organizes society**, reinforcing and naturalizing inequalities and violence between men and women.

Building on this, Gayle Rubin (1989) argued that sexuality itself produces specific inequalities, which are related to but distinct from those of the sex-gender system. She described a **hierarchy of sexual acts** in which heterosexual, monogamous, marital, or romantic relationships are placed at the top, receiving legitimacy and recognition. At the bottom, by contrast, are those deemed less respectable or even deviant —such as homosexual relationships, polyamory, non-marital sex, sex work, masturbation, or BDSM— which are stigmatized and marginalized. This classification system does more than reflect social attitudes: it actively distributes rights, respect, and social approval to some, while imposing stigma, exclusion, and discrimination on others

The following table summarises the most relevant concepts explained so far and the relation among them:

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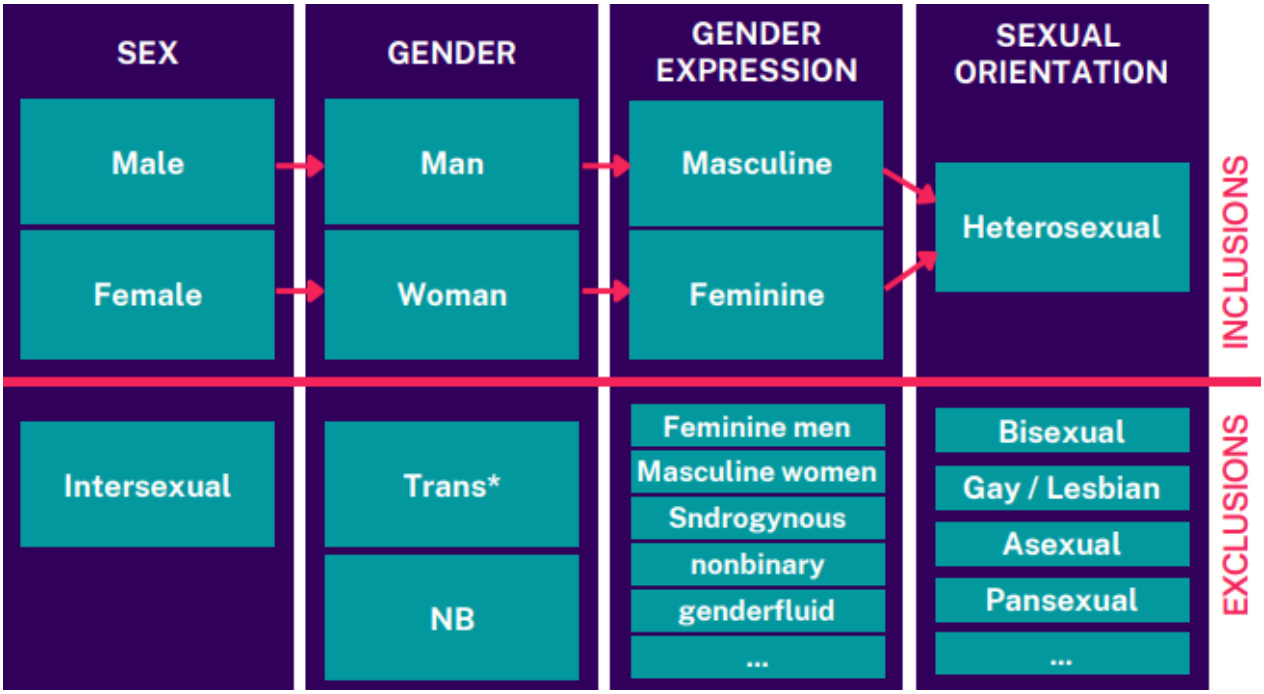

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The 29th August 2025.

2.2. Gender-based violence

When we talk about violence, we must begin by locating Johan Galtung's (1969) **Triangle of Violence**, which identifies three interrelated dimensions: **direct violence** (physical or verbal harm, the most visible form), **structural violence** (the denial of rights and systemic inequalities embedded in social, political, and economic structures), and **cultural violence** (beliefs, values, and norms that legitimize or normalize oppression). These three dimensions are not isolated; cultural violence naturalizes direct violence, while structural violence legitimizes cultural violence. Together, they sustain systems of domination and make violence appear inevitable or invisible.

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Feminist theory has applied this framework to show how **gender-based violence** (GBV) is not merely about individual acts of aggression, but **part of a broader system of oppression**. It is a structural social problem, reproduced generation after generation through culture, education, media, religion, advertising, and even digital platforms. GBV exists in every society, across all social groups and ages, and acts as an instrument of control and domination designed to enforce gender roles and maintain male power, along with compulsory heterosexuality. This broad understanding of violence allows us to conceptualize **LGBTphobic violence as another expression of gender-based violence** as structural, cultural, and direct violence directed at people who dissent from the heterosexual and binary regime. Gender nonconforming individuals, lesbian women, gay men, bisexual, trans, intersex, and queer people are often subjected to stigma, exclusion, and even criminalization simply because their bodies, identities, or desires do not conform to the hegemonic model.

From an **intersectional and decolonial perspective**, it is clear that not all women or gender-diverse people experience violence in the same way. Black and migrant women, for example, face intersecting oppressions: they may suffer gendered violence entangled with racism, economic exploitation, and colonial legacies. Angela Davis (1981/2004) showed how the violence experienced by white women in the U.S. is not comparable to the violence endured by Black women during slavery or segregation. Similarly, Black men, often stereotyped as sexual predators under racist colonial logics, have also been victims of racial violence and white supremacy. These examples illustrate how **GBV cannot be understood outside of broader systems of oppression such as racism, ableism, classism, and colonialism**. Therefore, gender-based violence must be understood as more than violence against women. While women and girls are disproportionately affected—precisely because of their structurally subordinate position in patriarchal systems—GBV also encompasses violence against those who do not conform to hegemonic masculinity or cisheteronormativity. This is why some theorists also speak of patriarchal violence, to underline how oppression targets all those who deviate from socially imposed gender and sexuality norms.

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2.2.1. Expressions of Gender-based Violence

When we talk about gender-based violence, the focus is often biased: the first image that tends to come to mind is physical violence. While this form certainly exists—especially when the violent relationship is already advanced—it is not the most common. **Psychological violence** is the **most widespread** expression of GBV. Along with sexual violence, it often remains invisible. For this reason, it is important to highlight some of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence that affect women.

Form of gender-based violence	Description
Physical violence	Violent acts generating **physical harm**, for example, pushing, beating, punching, kicking, etc.
Psychological and emotional violence	Violent acts generating **psychological damage**. For example, with practices such as humiliating, threatening, despising, controlling, devaluing, ridiculing, ignoring, manipulating, forcing, dominating, insulting, yelling.
Sexual violence	**Unwanted acts of a sexual nature** such as exposing, touching, pressure to engage in sexual practices, forcing unwanted practices, etc.
Obstetric violence and violation of sexual and reproductive rights	Preventing or **hindering access to truthful information**, necessary **for making autonomous and informed decisions**. It includes forced sterilization, forced pregnancy, the prevention of abortion in the legally established cases, and the difficulty of accessing contraceptive methods, methods for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections and HIV, and assisted reproductive methods, as well as such as gynecological and obstetric practices that do not respect the decisions, the body, the health and the emotional processes of women.
Economic violence	Intentional **deprivation of economic resources** with behaviours such as controlling the expenses of the other party, controlling the management of their economic or shared resources.

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Form of gender-based violence	Description
Cyber violence	All those that are exercised **through social networks and electronic devices**. For example, controlling through WhatsApp, falsifying profiles, forcing to give all passwords and management of personal accounts, sexpandering, revenge sexual images, etc.
Second-order violence	Physical or psychological violence, reprisals, humiliations and persecution exercised **against people who support victims** of sexist violence. It includes the acts that prevent the prevention, detection, care and recovery of women in situations of sexist violence.
Vicarious violence	Any type of violence exercised **against sons and daughters** in order to cause psychological damage to the mother.

2.2.2. Settings of Gender-based Violence

Understanding the settings where GBV occurs is essential, because violence is not only the result of individual actions but is also **deeply rooted in social structures and everyday practices**. By identifying how different spaces can enable or normalize violence — through silence, tolerance, or lack of accountability— we are better equipped to recognize risks, develop protective measures, and promote environments that foster equality, respect, and safety.

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Setting	Description
Intimate relationships	Physical, psychological, digital, sexual or economic violence against a woman and perpetrated **by the man** who is or has been her spouse, partner or by the person **in close relationships with her**.
Family setting	Physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence against women and minors within the family and perpetrated **by members of the family itself**, within the framework of affective relationships and ties in the family environment. Does not include violence exerted in the sphere of the couple.
Working setting	Physical, sexual, economic, digital or psychological violence that can occur **in the public or private sphere during the workday, or outside the work setting** and the established hours if it is related to work. Some of its forms include harassment based on gender, sexual harassment and pregnancy or maternity discrimination.
Social and community setting	It may comprehend: sexual assaults; sexual harassment; trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation and for other purposes with a gender dimension; female genital mutilation or risk of suffering it; violence derived from armed conflicts; violence against women's sexual and reproductive rights (such as selective abortions and forced sterilizations); femicides, suicide inductions and suicides as a consequence of the pressure and violence

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Setting	Description
	exerted against women; gender-based assaults, humiliation, degrading treatment, threats and coercion in public space; restrictions or deprivation of freedom for women, or access to public space or private spaces, or to work, training, sports, religious or recreational activities, as well as restrictions on freedom of expression regarding their sexual orientation or expression and identity gender, or its aesthetic, political or religious expression; retaliation for individual and collective speeches and expressions of women who demand respect for their rights, as well as public expressions and speeches that encourage, promote or directly or indirectly incite hostility, discrimination or violence towards women.
Digital environment	Sexist violence that occurs in **digital communication networks**, understood as a new agora of interaction, participation and governance through information and communication technologies. Other practices include cyberbullying, surveillance and monitoring, slander, insults or discriminatory or derogatory expressions, threats, unauthorized access to social media equipment and accounts, breach of privacy, manipulation of private data, impersonation, non-consensual disclosure of personal information or intimate content, damage to the equipment or channels of expression of women and women's groups, speeches inciting discrimination against women,

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Setting	Description
	sexual blackmail through digital channels and the publication of personal information with the intention of other people assaulting, locating or harassing a woman.
Institutional sphere	Actions and omissions of the authorities, public personnel and agents of any public body or institution whose purpose is **to delay, obstruct or impede access to public policies and the exercise of the rights recognized** by this law for ensuring a life free of gender-based violence, in accordance with the assumptions included in the applicable sectoral legislation. Women's political life and the public sphere: gender-based violence that occurs in areas of public and political life, such as political institutions and public administrations, political parties, the media and social networks.
Educational sphere	Any type of violence that occurs **in the educational environment among members of the educational community**. It can occur in peers, from adults to minors or vice versa. It includes harassment, sexual abuse, and physical, sexual, mental, or emotional abuse. Some of these abuses are based on gender or sexual identity

3. Understanding Intersectionality and Feminist approaches and contributions

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Feminism—or more accurately, **feminisms** — are diverse social, cultural, and political movements that **seek equal rights for all people and the elimination of discrimination and violence rooted in cisheteropatriarchy** from a gender perspective. This concept emerged from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). As an analytical tool, it enables us to examine how gender relations are shaped within a specific community and historical moment. It is both a category of analysis and a way of understanding the world that **highlights power dynamics and inequalities**. Applying a gender perspective means recognizing the sociocultural differences in every area of life and considering how policies, actions, and situations **affect them differently depending on their gender identity and expression**. It involves integrating this lens into analysis, planning, and decision-making with the aim of **achieving deep transformations** in personal and social relationships, **moving toward greater equality.**

It is important to stress that there is no single, homogeneous feminism. The term feminism**s** better reflects the plurality of struggles, identities, and historical trajectories that make up the movement. These include, among others, European feminisms, Black feminisms, lesbofeminism, transfeminism, pro-sexual rights activism, ecofeminism, and autonomous feminisms—each with distinct goals, needs, and contributions. This is what **Intersectionality** is aimed to. This term was developed by Black Feminisms and the anti-racist movement in the late 1980s. From a theoretical and political perspective, it reveals how **women's lives are shaped not only by gender, but also by the interrelation of racism, classism, LGBTphobia, ableism, ageism, and other systems of oppression**. Thinkers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Michele Wallace highlighted that women do not form a single, homogeneous group, but instead live through diverse and intersecting conditions that produce distinct vulnerabilities and forms of resistance.

Western societies have globally imposed restrictive norms around gender and sexuality that reinforce GBV. Heteronormativity, binary gender roles, sexism, ableism, and racism work together to legitimize certain bodies, desires, and

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relationships, while devaluing or criminalizing others. This normalization of hierarchies sustains violence not as an isolated act, but as a systemic mechanism of domination and control. From a decolonial perspective, this analysis is especially important because **Western, white, middle-class feminism** has often universalized its own experience as "the" women's experience, **ignoring or minimizing the realities of racialized, migrant, working-class, or disabled women**. Black and decolonial feminists have exposed how the very categories of "man" and "woman" were historically defined through colonial and Eurocentric logics, **excluding other gender identities and imposing models of family, sexuality, and social organization on colonized peoples**. Angela Davis, for example, demonstrated how the violence experienced by white women in the United States cannot be equated with the violence endured by Black women under slavery or segregation, where gendered violence was inseparable from racial violence.

Understanding gender-based violence (GBV) from an intersectional and anticolonial lens means recognizing that **violence is not experienced in the same way by all women**. A migrant woman facing intimate partner violence may also confront racism and legal precarity; a trans woman may experience GBV entangled with transphobia and social exclusion; a woman with disabilities may face not only gendered violence but also structural ableism that limits her access to protection and justice. These overlapping oppressions create a matrix of domination that shapes both the forms violence takes and the barriers to seeking support. Seen from this perspective, addressing GBV requires more than gender-sensitive approaches: it demands an intersectional and decolonial framework that takes into account how **violence is reproduced through global inequalities, colonial legacies, and the silencing of marginalized voices**. Only by acknowledging these intersections can we build responses that are truly inclusive and transformative.

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