



# Gendered Harm

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Victoria Canning's (2018) new book makes an important contribution to a growing body of scholarship on the asylum system, bringing much-needed attention to the lived realities and consequences of Britain's "hostile



environment” for immigrants. “Hostile environment” is a term first used by Prime Minister Theresa May in 2012 when she held the post of Home Secretary to describe her plans for reducing undocumented migration to Britain and making migrants’ experiences in Britain difficult. [\*Gendered Harm\*](#) focuses on what it means for women seeking recognition as refugees in just such an environment. At the heart of Canning’s incisive, but unrelentingly human account of the causes, contours and consequences of the multiple forms of state violence inherent in the asylum process is a powerful understanding of what it means to think about violence as structural. Academically, she brings in a useful framework for considering the unique and multiple forms of structurally embedded state violence experienced by migrants. In practical terms she focuses on the material structures themselves and the very human forms of suffering they cause for women seeking asylum.

*Whilst Gendered Harm is a very specific story of the British state, it is also the story of other states.*

The term “hostile environment” was coined in Britain, but it reflects a global attitude towards those seeking protection. Nation states around the world grapple with asylum, from the “crisis” at the geographic edges of Fortress Europe, to the US/Mexico border to Australian policy on arrivals by sea.



Canning’s account concentrates on questions of structural power and violence, situating the British asylum process socially, politically, geographically, and culturally in a context of colonialism, austerity and fear mongering that mistrusts and denigrates migrant populations. She reminds us that experiences, collectively in the “asylum system” and for individual asylum-seeking women, exist on what she calls an “intersectional continuum.” (27) Such a continuum exists not only in the life experiences of women impacting their identities, but



also extends institutionally beyond asylum, geographically beyond the UK, and historically beyond the current rhetoric of migration ‘crises.’

Gendered violence is a difficult, both for academics and in terms of policy-making. Not only is it intersectionally experienced as part of women’s daily lives and migration experience around the globe, but as a form of harm it at once necessitates thoughtful consideration and a keen awareness of avoiding perpetuating damaging tropes about women’s lack of agency, and in particular, tropes about migrant women and their experiences in non-western countries with men of colour. Canning deftly handles the preservation of individual experience, story and agency, whilst remaining firmly in a structure and institution-focused critique of asylum and its gendered and racialized harms.

*Canning is also careful to describe not only the power of the state and its systems, but also the important, powerful forms of individual and collective resistance that foment in the face of such hostility and violence (149.)*

She places these acts of resistance on a continuum as well – from the “everyday resistance” of surviving and refusing to be silent when faced with multiple forms of violence and exclusion, to specific acts, such as those acts of migrants who engage in lengthy and painful legal battles to gain recognition for their rights, or those who engage in hunger strikes in detention centres (153-154).

Canning stays close to Paul Farmer’s calls to ensure that analyses of structural violence recognise the “materiality of the social,” asking us to focus on “who wins, who loses, and what weapons are used” and to consider the “enabling conditions” which help to erase both history and accountability (Farmer 2004: 308).

*Along these lines, Canning pays particularly close attention to the way the asylum process perpetuates and deepens trauma, which has real physical, emotional and psycho-social consequences (49).*



Crucially, Canning makes clear that these are not unintended consequences of an otherwise humane system fit for purpose, on the contrary, they are an integral part of a system designed to make the experience of seeking asylum as bad as, if not worse than, that of the persecution from which people flee (47).

Discussions of accountability are also central to Canning's work. She refers to it as "pinpointing responsibility" (66) for the architecture of a violent system and for the daily violence experienced by asylum-seeking women. I remain sceptical of the value of such an exercise, or even in framing questions in this way. I would argue, however, that perhaps "pinpointing" isn't a useful goal - diffuse, internalized, institutionalized forms of harm cannot be pinpointed, it is their diffuseness, their very sense of inevitability, propelled by momentum across history, spaces and actors that makes these harms so ubiquitous, widespread and difficult to combat. Broader cultural and structural changes to attitudes about migrants generally and asylum-seekers specifically are likely to be more effective in the long run.

*Among the most powerful contributions of Canning's research is the useful scaffolding it creates for considering other forms of structural violence.*

These multiple violences spill out institutionally beyond the formal immigration procedures into spaces like healthcare and housing, beyond the gates of the detention centers, into the everyday lives of migrants and other racialized communities across Britain. Violence against asylum seekers becomes part of a larger state apparatus perpetuating racism, misogyny and gross inequalities in access, health and wealth. Canning firmly situates asylum as central to any academic or activist approaches that aim to combat these violences across Britain and globally. Her work is a valuable addition to the toolbox of critical activist-scholarship.

## **References:**



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Kirkup, James. 2012. "Theresa May interview: 'We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception'." *The Telegraph*. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9291483/Theresa-May-interview-Were-going-to-give-illegal-migrants-a-really-hostile-reception.html>

**Canning, Victoria. 2018. *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System*. London: Routledge.**

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