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**Gendered Asylum: Race and Violence in US Law and Politics, S.L. McKinnon, University of Illinois Press (2016), (165 pages ISBN: 978 -0-2520-8191-0)**

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### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Cooke, S (2019) Gendered Asylum: Race and Violence in US Law and Politics, S.L. McKinnon, University of Illinois Press (2016), (165 pages ISBN: 978 -0-2520-8191-0). Women's Studies International Forum, 74. p. 226. ISSN 0277-5395**

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Gendered Asylum: Race and Violence in US Law and Politics, Sara L. McKinnon, University of Illinois Press (2016). (165 pp.) ISBN: 978 -0-2520-8191-0

In a period of great political turmoil and uncertainty following the 2016 US Presidential Elections, this book could not have emerged at a more appropriate time. Tracing the history of gender as a political category for determining asylum application outcomes in the US, McKinnon not only speaks to the complicated relationship between gender as grounds for asylum and the US political system, but also to the politicisation of the female body historically and in contemporary politics. In her exploration of gender as a political category in asylum applications, McKinnon engages with diverging components of gender and political persecution, ranging from domestic violence and veiling, to sexual self-identification.

*Gendered Asylum* commences with vignettes regarding the asylum application processes of Pierre (Haiti), Parastoo Fatin (Iranian-born), and Gina Ricarda Miranda (Honduras). These experiences set the scene for US asylum law and are later utilised to evidence some of the many ways gender was brought to the attention of the US system. Charting the 32 year journey, from 1980-2012, from the emergence of gender-based asylum application through to the inception of a project targeting the eradication of gender-based violence through 'development, defense, and diplomacy' initiatives (p.3), McKinnon highlights the multitude of ways in which gender becomes a political category because of violence, and the political and legal engagements accompanying asylum claims.

Chapter One focuses on the cases of Central American women and the significant impact of transnational publicity. Rody Adali Alvarado Peña's (Guatemala) case, which involved extreme [intimate] violence, highlights the politicised nature of gendered violence and raises questions about US responsibilities in such instances, especially when Human Rights are brought to the fore of issues. She utilises the concept of pastoral power to highlight relations between race and gender; with the case of Lesly Yajayra Perdome's 2010 asylum application being the best representation of 'individuating affirmative gesture'.

In Chapter Two, gendered violence is engaged with in two distinct forms. Firstly, genital mutilation and the physical and psychological ramifications that accompany it are engaged with. The 'traditional' violence used against women as a means of controlling their body is explored and the US Legal system's engagements with it as a measurement of eligibility for asylum claims is revealed. Political resistance through veiling is also examined, with compulsory veiling not being considered a strong enough reason for asylum if the applicant is prepared to [grudgingly] follow state requirements.

McKinnon then moves to examine the Chinese woman's body as a political tool for both the state and her husband. Chapter Three explores the highly politicised nature of female reproduction in China during its 'One Child Policy' era, evidencing state enforced abortions and sterilisation and highlighting US quandaries over whether the threat or actuality of such procedures met the threshold for persecution according to asylum laws. The complexities of the female experience in this instance goes beyond control of the female body to what has been labelled as 'standing in their shoes'. Referring to husbands utilising their wife's experience as grounds for asylum, McKinnon explores how men were granted asylum based on gendered violence experienced by their spouse at the hands of the state. Initially, this appropriation of female experiences was only permissible within a legally recognised marriage; however, it is highlighted how a more liberal approach, expanding to incorporate non-married couples, was being considered.

As the reader progresses into Chapter Four, the focus on gender shifts slightly, moving to focus on self-identification and how this is recognised in US asylum law. The primary focus for this chapter is the 'segregation of gender as an institutional category for claiming refugee protection', focussing specifically on gay and transgender asylum based claims. The chapter highlights vulnerabilities experienced by individuals in different societies, resulting in their asylum applications being based on variables such as their membership to a group of gay men with female identities. Whilst these individuals are usually recognised as female, asylum law emerges as an exception to the rule with individuals being recognised as gay with female identities. At this point, McKinnon engages with rhetoric scholars, how sexuality in US asylum law is read, and how sex and gender are fixed onto a body.

Chapter Five builds on this rhetoric and examines homosexuality as grounds for asylum claims. Throughout this final chapter, McKinnon engages with the issue of proof of persecution because of an individual's sexual orientation. She also highlights the invisible interfaces of gender and sexuality for lesbians and gender conforming gay man; with deportation occurring on the grounds that individuals were not 'gay enough' (p.103). Persecution based on an individual looking like a lesbian is also highlighted in the case of the Philippines, whereby individuals are targeted through homophobic slurs professional avoidance and 'blacklisting', with the extent to which these issues can be measured, impacting on the success of asylum claims.

In her concluding chapter, McKinnon brings together these five key components, illustrating how these all contribute to the emergence and development of gender as a political classification in US Asylum law. Overall, *Gendered Asylum* critically engages with gender as perceived by the self, the other, and the state in relation to political persecution and asylum requests. The myriad of complexities that emerge from this topic are addressed in a respectfully fascinating manner, allowing the reader to absorb the different nuances, which emerge without feeling overwhelmed. The timeline of *Gendered Asylum* results in the start of Obama's second term being the concluding moment. What would be good to see in the future is using this conclusion as a point of departure in continuing to trace issues of gender and asylum into current environments, where political and social rhetoric have drastically altered.

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