

Gender Justice: Beyond Binaries and Buzzwords

Article by Claire Gilder, Dinah Bons, Dounia Jari, Jennifer Kwao

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Mainstream feminism in Europe has made gains in influencing the EU to act on gender equality. However, the lack of nuance, meaningful engagement with the concept of intersectionality, and siloed approach to gender equality have meant that these gains benefit women occupying the norm. In this panel interview, Jennifer Kwao spoke to Claire Gilder, Dinah Bons, and Dounia Jari – three racial justice organisers and experts – who shed light on communities the mainstream isn't speaking to, structural inequalities and how the EU can create meaningful change by understanding and going beyond binaries.

Jennifer Kwao: I've often heard black women say that they don't identify as "feminist". Why do you think this is?

Claire Gilder: I think people disassociate with this term because the textbook idea of "feminist" is very white and very binary. As black women, as racialised women, we don't necessarily fit the white, middle-class, cis-het archetype. The 19th-century abolitionist and black women's rights activist Sojourner Truth asked the white feminist movement "Ain't I a woman?" over a hundred years ago. It still applies today. Black feminism is so much more accessible to me, not only because of its acknowledgement of race, but also class. What do you all think?

Dounia Jari: I agree. In my activist circles, many people – not only women – do not call themselves feminists. The disassociation with feminism has a lot to do with what Claire said about binaries. People want to do away with binaries and labels. People who are conditioned as women discover that we all have different challenges in life and that also makes them shy away from blanket labels. In queer and activist communities for example, we now speak of communities to acknowledge the diversity within this group.

Dinah Bons: For me, feminism has been part of what I see as "the white system" that was not intended for people and women of colour. I think feminism has, for a long time, not had a place for racialised women. Racialised women were rarely seen as part of intellectual, academic, scientific, or artistic communities. Decolonisation needs to be part of the larger feminist movement; that is, women who want to fight against the norms and structures of society as it is. White women fighting patriarchy have too often not done so in an intersectional way. They overlooked women of colour who have been working, raising children, often outside marriage structures. These overlooked women fight for their rights and lives. That struggle for survival – especially if you live here in the Western hemisphere – is something that has never been taken up by the mainstream. That, for me, is why racialised women don't see themselves in the movement.

We do not speak enough about the compounded and unique challenges that come with being at the margins of society.

Claire Gilder: I want to add to that point: take reproductive rights, for example. White feminism centres access to abortion – something that is important, yes, but there’s so much more to consider. With black feminism, we’re talking about reproductive justice because there is a very different history around reproductive healthcare that is not widely acknowledged in the mainstream. In the United States, the eugenics movement targeted women of colour for forced sterilisations and pushed the idea that these women should not be allowed to reproduce. In the United Kingdom, Depo-Provera shots were administered to black and brown women in the 1970s and 1980s against their will in a racist effort to sterilise communities. Mainstream feminism often lacks this kind of nuance. What use is abortion if I can’t get to an abortion clinic? If I can’t choose what kind of contraception I want, or if I don’t have access to it? It’s “my body, my choice” when it comes to abortion, but not if I want to wear a hijab or be a sex worker?

To what extent have you seen structures of discrimination being reproduced in your work and within your own communities?

Dounia Jari: We still see patriarchy being upheld in feminist and queer movements. Patriarchy is a structure. It is not, per se, something that is appointed to just men, but it is a structure, and as people, we’re keeping it alive by copying certain behaviours. In the last few years in my community, the queer Muslim community, we have seen queer men becoming aware of misogyny in homosexual spaces. I’ve had personal experiences where my male, gay friends thought it was OK to touch me in an inappropriate way that a straight male wouldn’t get away with. Our society is made in a way where we must behave in certain ways to be accepted. That affects how we move forward as a society.

Dinah Bons: When I worked as a director of a trans organisation, I observed the reproduction of misogyny that’s usually found in wider society. You have eight or nine trans people in the room and the women are always seen as “too loud”, “too late” etc. These are textbook examples but because they happen in the trans community and you are called transphobic for calling them out. It’s very difficult to address. There is a notion that “I’ve lived a life as a woman, so now I cannot be misogynist”. It’s always good to keep each other accountable in a constructive way.

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In HIV activism, and in the sex-worker movement for example, it’s very white – as soon as you start to talk about race, they are confused or ask why it’s part of the discussion. I always open it up by referring to girls who work in windows, and ask: Are many white, blonde, Dutch girls working there? Often, they don’t know any. Then I ask: why are these workers not here and why are they not invited? How can you advocate for our rights if you

don't invite us or know our needs? Whenever we are with black and Latin and brown sex-workers, we're free to talk about the work and the racism that is present there. When we speak about violence against people in that working environment, it's never attached to race.

How effective has the EU's approach been to tackling racial inequality and discrimination? Is there one?

Claire Gilder: The race directive is over 20 years old and it was a ground-breaking piece of legislation. The problem is that we don't see what is being done because so many member states don't collect equality data. We are also not able to evidence the effectiveness of EU law in terms of how it does or doesn't help racialised women or people because in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and across Europe as a whole, we don't have the data that we need. How can I say what the socio-economic situation of black women in France is if France won't even acknowledge that black women exist? In continental Europe, it feels as though governments don't want to talk about race. If we look at the UK, where I'm from, we know black women are five times more likely to die in childbirth than their white counterparts because this data is collected and studied. When we look at France, it's up to community organisations to carry out surveys around race and healthcare. It's not easy to see what impact EU policy is having.

Dounia Jari: I think we need more protection by laws and more self-determination for racialised people. The best example is the ban on headscarves in several countries in Europe. In the Netherlands and France, the discussion has been that a headscarf means oppression and removing it benefits the woman. That is just not the case. It has everything to do with self-determination. If a woman can't leave her house without a headscarf because of your law, you are making her stay indoors. We need to first recognise self-determination and then ask how can we protect people and women.

Dinah Bons: Equality can only come if you address inequality in legislation. But policies are not a magic wand that can suddenly wave away all inequality. That's why I really love activism. Through campaigns and advocacy, we shed light on our lived realities, as well as how to address human rights when they are not taken seriously and have been violated. I always try to put that back on the table, even though as a woman of colour at these high-level meetings, you're often dismissed. People say "you're always so angry", but that's a mechanism to devalue what you're saying.

What do you think of the growing popularity of "intersectionality" in policy spaces?

Dounia Jari: Many don't understand what intersectionality is. Too often, I have heard people define intersectionality as multiple identities and then they stop there. They don't look far enough at what intersectionality is and what we can do with it.

The term comes from a 1976 court case involving black women employees of General Motors. These women were invisibilised by the court siding with General Motors which argued they had not discriminated against the women because "we have women and we have black men in our company." We do not speak enough about the compounded and unique challenges that come with being at the margins of society. My being a queer woman

of colour doesn't mean that I face the same challenges as another queer woman of colour. My challenges are connected with shaming culture. Another queer woman of colour, who doesn't live in or experience a shaming culture, doesn't have the same challenges.

The fact that the EU doesn't like to talk about race necessarily means that when they talk about intersectionality - which is about racialised folks - they leave that out.

Dinah Bons: Intersectionality as a concept is a fantastic development. It started with Kimberlé Crenshaw, who first introduced it to academic works and law. It hasn't worked in European frameworks because there, intersectionality is deemed important but not used as a lens to make visible and address the lived experiences of racialised women. That is exactly what Kimberlé Crenshaw educated people on. Living conditions, economic structures, social position and the phobia that comes with this combine and shape different modes of oppression. It is now often used to seem credible. To truly make change, people with a seat at the decision table, who are quick to cite intersectionality, need to include people who live those realities in decision-making.

Claire Gilder: Intersectionality has become a buzzword. It's been depoliticised. The institutions get wind of these terms and they use them as a distraction. Just because you said intersectionality, do you think that I'm automatically going to believe that you're including me? A concrete demonstration can be found in the EU's Gender Equality Strategy, where intersectionality is point number five. It's so misguided! Because it's not a point. It's not housing and employment. It's not education. It's an overarching lens that you're applying to your analysis to ensure the inclusion of racialised women, women with disabilities, queer women. The fact that the EU doesn't like to talk about race necessarily means that when they talk about intersectionality - which is about racialised folks - they leave that out, so we're already lost.

What legislative changes or new approaches do we need to see to truly take a racial justice perspective on board?

Dinah Bons: We must start with research and data collection on structural racism. So for example, within the police, within institutions, how many times people give feedback in interviews on inequality and inequity. The Fundamental Rights Agency made a start on this with its [report in 2018](#). It would be interesting to see them build on this and expand this evidencing work that is so crucial in advocacy and policy change. I truly believe that those figures will show what it means to be a person of colour, a black person, on the European continent when you enter a building, a school, a hospital and so on.

Claire Gilder: I agree. I also think situated knowledge - knowledge that comes from lived experience - and expertise together are so important in this effort. I just want people to realise knowledge about race and racial justice is an expertise. It's not just because you are brown or black that you're an expert on race, racism, racial justice, the policies, etc. In the institutions, it feels as though this is not necessarily taken seriously. Policymakers wouldn't

normally go to people on the street and say, “You use a bank right? Come and help me shape the economy!” But this is the way they treat race. They’ll see a black person and say, “You did geography as your degree. Come and talk to us about the socioeconomic effects of race.” Until the impacts of racialisation are taken seriously and acknowledged by member states and until race is something that is quantified, I don’t think we’ll go anywhere. We still get a lot of backlash even just talking about it.

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When we talk about what kind of legislative initiatives we can hope for from the EU, I don’t know. It’s important that we use the structures that we exist in and try and improve them, but to what extent? How much of our energy do we spend on trying to reform a system that wasn’t built for us in the first place? There’s going to be a directive on gender-based violence in late 2021. The feminist lobby in Brussels is talking about male violence against women. Because these are the loudest voices here, everyone wants to criminalise gender-based violence. But this completely ignores the fact that the people charged with administering these punitive measures, like the police, perpetrate racist violence with impunity.

For me, the best thing the EU can do is to open the purse strings and give money to people who are on the ground with communities, who are looking to improve the material circumstances of our lives. The EU can make their funds more accessible to racialised communities.

What are some of the ways racialised women are having an impact and defying the structures of discrimination?

Claire Gilder: The [Combahee River Collective](#) advocated that if black women are free then everybody is free. If racialised women are free, we’re all good. Our freedom necessarily means that all other levels of oppression have been dismantled. I often think about the work of the incredible women I’m surrounded by. My mum works in a homeless shelter and provides regular meals for another, creating a safe space for those who don’t have one. My godmother ran a refuge for survivors of domestic violence and their children. My aunty runs a black Saturday school that teaches black history and also works to archive the experiences of black elders in the UK. My wife is an unapologetic and fiercely intelligent racial justice advocate. Dinah and Dounia themselves do incredible work for the BIPOC trans community, the Muslim queer community, the sex worker community and beyond. These safe havens that are provided for people, this knowledge sharing that occurs, the sense of community that has been created – this is all crucial.

On a more macro level, I am so grateful for [gal-dem magazine](#), a media collective “committed to sharing the perspectives of people of colour from marginalised genders” and [AZ Magazine](#), focused on platforming QTIBPOC talent and addressing issues within our

communities. I also really appreciate [Kiffe ta Race](#) a podcast by the brilliant Rokhaya Diallo and Grace Ly that addresses the issue of race in France. This, for me, is ground-breaking work, because it means that we have media outlets making space for otherwise marginalised views.

Dinah Bons: The trans BPOIC community has put anti-racism, sex-work activism, and HIV – all unpopular topics – on the political agenda. When in the room with policymakers and people from the municipality, white trans activists will say, “Please don’t talk about it, because then they would think we are also part of this issue, and it’s your issue, not our issue.” But we refused to be silenced; we said, “no, we are people of colour, and we face this. We are people living with HIV or it is very likely that we might get HIV.” It really makes it challenging but when you organise from a racial justice perspective, you find partners in different communities and understand that the fight is about dismantling racist structures. We need to find other people who are proud of their heritage and are not afraid to speak out about it. I find it empowering to see collaborations and new initiatives.

Claire Gilder: I was so encouraged when Clémence Zamora-Cruz gave a testimony at the beginning of the [EU Anti-Racism Summit](#) in March 2021. I was impressed because it was a welcome step away from the “business as usual” approach of the summit. Having a trans, migrant, sex-worker of colour give testimony about very real and ignored issues that the community face was encouraging. We’ll see what the follow-up is, but it gave me hope.



Claire Gilder is a political advisor with a passion for gender and racial justice. She has several years of experience working in and around the European Institutions and has an excellent understanding of their processes. Claire was instrumental in the proposal of a European Anti-Racism Coordinator and she recently established a support group for racialised staff in the European Parliament. She obtained her LL.B from King’s College London and her LL.M from the Institute of European Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.



Dinah Bons is a French/Dutch LGBTQI+ /Trans lobbyist, HIV and AIDS and sex work activist, as well as a former politician and duo chair for the black and people of colour trans organisation, Trans United Europe. She is an operational board member at the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers Europe (ICRSE) and a board member of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP). She is a member of the H TEAM which brings together organisations involved in the prevention and treatment of HIV in Amsterdam.



Dounia Jari is an activist, specialised in the field of sexual diversity. She is a dynamic advocate for LGBTI Muslims in the Netherlands and abroad, where she has been involved in the startup of the European Queer Muslim Network. As the co-founder and chairperson of Maruf, she is dedicated to advocating for a society where the power of diversity and intersectionality is valued. As a trainer, manager, and journalist with a passion for music and an unconditional love for (riding) motorcycles, her power source is her diverse identity.



Jennifer Kwao is an intern at the *Green European Journal*. She holds an MA in European Studies from KU Leuven, where she wrote her master's dissertation on Ghana's colonial legacy in its trade and development relations with the EU and China.

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