

Title—Gender and Empire
Author—Philippa Levine
Year—2004

Categories: Gender, Empire, Colonialism, Women

Place: British Empire

Time: 1700-1960

Argument Synopsis:

An essay collection focused on the role of gender in the British Empire. Levine's *Gender and Empire* emphasizes that the idea, and the building of, empires cannot be understood without applying a gendered perspective. This does not mean that gender had the same influences everywhere at all times, with Levine cautioning against the use of universalizing historical interpretations. Her collection is focused on the British Empire from the eighteenth century onward. Levine draws parallels between the conditions of British women and colonized people. She argues that the British Empire was a deeply masculine space, with **white maleness defined as physical, responsible, productive and hardworking**. She highlights how gender became a hierarchical ordering of quality, skill and usefulness in the British Empire, both in the colonies and the metropole. For her, questions and issues about gender are central to any historical inquiry. This anthology seeks to demonstrate that gender is not supplemental but is always integral and always at work.

The collection begins with three essays that consider gender and empire during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries respectively. Barbara Bush's "Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century," seeks to highlight how working-class women experienced empire. She notes that imperialist activism, both pro and anti, was mostly for the elite and middle classes. Bush argues that working-class Britons experienced empire through migration to the white 'dominions.' Bush focuses on the wider participation of white women in empire as settlers, colonial wives, missionaries and welfare workers—as well as how these transformations affected imperial masculinities. She finds that the primacy of whiteness and Western cultural values is one of the most enduring legacies of the formal age of empire.

The following section considers gender and empire in the context of a specific theme, such as medicine, sexuality, or migration. Philippa Levine's "Sexuality, Gender, and Empire," argues that sex was a significant policy issue and a key site of colonial anxieties. She illuminates how perceived sexual excess in the colonies became the mark of inferiority, and a justification for British colonial rule. She explores various facets of **colonial sexuality**, including fears of unrestrained white sexuality undermining the imperial project. Colonial policy always stressed control, and this extended into the realm of sexuality. The essays in this collection rely on a variety of methodologies to explore the relationship between gender and empire.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- False historical assumption that Britain dismantled its empire relatively peacefully & its imperial rule was "more benign" than other European empires
- Imperial masculinity defined the British Empire and structured its socially & politically
- Gender does not operate the same in every location, but it is always operating