Contextualizing Gender
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Lecture - 51
Introduction to Biopolitics and Gender by Jemima Repo

Welcome dear participants. In weeks 9 and 10 we have discussed the scholarship on body, gender, femininities and masculinities. For theorists like Balsamo, Connell and other study theorists in the area of men's and masculinity studies, the body became the primary site of theorization, explication and its struggle. Acknowledging this under current we will look at the politics of biopower on the human bodies or population as a discourse.

In considering the engagement with gender and sexuality the upcoming lectures during this week, we will discuss the genealogy of gender, biopolitics of the gendered bodies, language as a biopolitical socio cultural tool and biopower and gender narrative in the virtual space of video games. In this module today we will look at the fundamentals of genealogy of gender and biopolitics.

We shall refer to an essay by Jemima Repo, the essay is titled 'Gender, Genealogy, Biopolitics' and it is an excerpt from her 2015 book 'The Biopolitics of Gender'.

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Repo teaches the politics of gender at Newcastle University. She is specialized in contemporary social and political theory especially feminist theory and biopolitics. Her essay "Gender, Genealogy, Biopolitics" is an excerpt from her book "The Biopolitics of Gender".

The book has won the 2017 International Studies Association's Feminist theory and Gender Studies Book Award, it theorizes the idea of gender itself as an apparatus of power developed to reproduce life and labor. Repo analyses the genealogy of gender in public and private spheres, she takes up administrative policies as an illustration of public sphere and the genealogy of gender in the family system as an illustration of private sphere.

Her objective is to deconstruct gender as a postmodern variable, capable of producing change in the public sphere in the form of politics and policy making and also in the private sphere in the form of family gender relations and sex. Repo attempts to read gender as a biopolitical tool, to connect the private and the public domain in our contemporary times. In order to understand the current biopolitical situatedness of gender, Repo refers to Foucault's renowned work 'the History of Sexuality' to begin her argument.

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In the first volume of 'the History of Sexuality', Foucault categorized "sexuality" as one of the defining biopolitical technologies of the 19th and 20th centuries. According to

Jemima Repo, quite similar to "sexuality" gender too has become the major subject of sexual, scientific and biopolitical discourse of the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

However, there remains a hesitation to define gender as a distinct category from sex. Sometimes the terms are used interchangeably. To elaborate on the genealogy of the biopolitics of gender which is the focus of this week, we would discuss the politics of gender and biopolitics as a modern neoliberal conceptualization. We shall begin by defining biopower and gender as two distinct constructs.

In the next slide we have a video. It talks about the concept of biopower as introduced by Foucault, in a series lecture 'Security, Territory, Population' which was published posthumously. He attempts to establish that power is an apparatus of control, is a product of the enlightenment; however, biopower marks the political economy of a new government rationality, which focuses on controlling population and also the individual actions.

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"In simple terms biopower is the power exhibited over individual bodies and population whereas, biopolitics discusses the relation between human biology and politics. Between 1970 and 1982, Foucault gave a series of lectures at the college to France, one of the more influential in 1978 was Security, Territory and Population, which was published posthumously in it he takes biopower as the central concept.

He said, 'this year I would like to begin studying something that I have called, somewhat vaguely, biopower. By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power. He goes on to argue that our traditional understanding of power is a product of the enlightenment.

We have earlier discussed the etymological origins and linguistic usage of the term gender. Post 1950s, the term gender went from being a nominator of types to a denotator of the sexual order of things. Feminists also started to use the term to challenge biological determinism and gradually, gender studies were established as an academic discipline".

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In the last seventy years, "gender" has become a scientific field of knowledge and a discursive fact that is spoken about, theorized, performed, articulated and contentiously debated. The term "gender" became a synonym for sex in everyday conversations and bureaucratic forms, social scientific surveys of different socio-political phenomena like voting, representation, employment, salaries, and parental leave decisions.
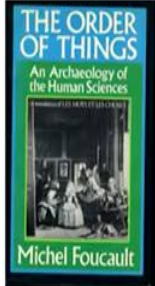
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In his work, 'The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences', Foucault suggests that Marxism "exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water: it is

unable to breathe anywhere else". Repo paraphrases Foucault to suggest that "gender" belongs to the twentieth century like fish to water - it could not have emerged anywhere else".

It influences social economic and political life. For Repo ""gender" like sexuality, is a historically specific discourse of sex". In considering, "gender as a discursive event of sex", Repo contextualizes Foucault's analysis of sexuality as an apparatus of biopower and social control.

By rereading Foucault, a discursive reading of gender as opposed to biological sex is attributed to the domain of psychiatry, and many gender theories suggest that gender has a psychiatric origin. We have also discussed the role of John Money in this context in earlier modules.

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The genesis of "gender theory" dates back to 1955 when psychiatrists John Money and his colleagues published a series of articles on the psychosexual development of intersex patients. And they named "psychological sex" as "gender" - that is a postnatal construction.

However, surgeries on children with "ambiguous" genitalia or transsexualities were still suggested in the name of social health and also in the name of the social order. As a

result of such misconceptions, "gender" became a mechanism for normalizing, disciplining and governing sex.

Let us further deconstruct the gender biopower relationality. How do we interpret gender as an apparatus of biopower? This will help us in decoding the practice of gender equality in our times, is gender equality a hoax or an achievable goal. Repo claims that in 1980s gender became an integral part of the policy making process; however, gender genealogy was still read through a sexuality reader to avoid distinguishing between the gender spectrum, gender performance, sexual orientation and biological sex.

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Repo has commented that "the genealogy of gender as an apparatus of biopower was instrumental in regimenting Western Post war capitalism through the management of sex. For feminists during the decades of 1970s and 80s, gender became a means of opposing biological determinism and its control over women's life administering bodies and capacities".

To showcase the gender biopolitics relationality, Repo posits that firstly, "gender theory" was applied by sociologists to sought explanations for the declining fertility rates in Western Europe from 1980s onwards. Repo argues that in 1990s gender became an integral part of the administrative process and policymaking in the EU. By the beginning of the 21st century, gender had become a discursive fact in science, politics, media,

culture and government. It operated as a technology of biopolitical and also neo-liberal governmentality.

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The objective of thus integrating gender into public policy, was to optimize fertility through gender equality policy. As an instrument of biopower since its psychiatric birth, "gender" was utilized as a biopolitical tool to socialize individuals, especially women to reproduce in order to maintain a healthy welfare system and also increase the economic productivity. Further, gender equality was touted as the great unifier of a balanced work and family life. Let us look at a video, it introduces gender mainstreaming and gender as a statistical tool for analyzing progress.
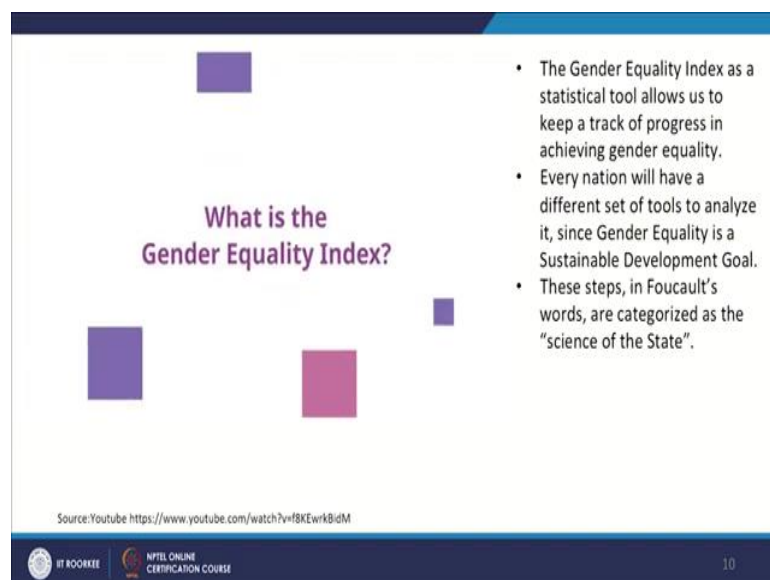
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"The Gender Equality Index as a statistical tool allows us to keep a track of progress in achieving gender equality. Every nation will have a different set of tools to analyze it, since gender equality is a Sustainable Development Goal. These steps in the words of Foucault are categorized as the "science of the State".

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What is the Gender Equality Index? Aegis gender equality index measures the progress of gender equality in the European Union. It shows gender equality trends in the domains of work, money, knowledge, time, power, health and violence.

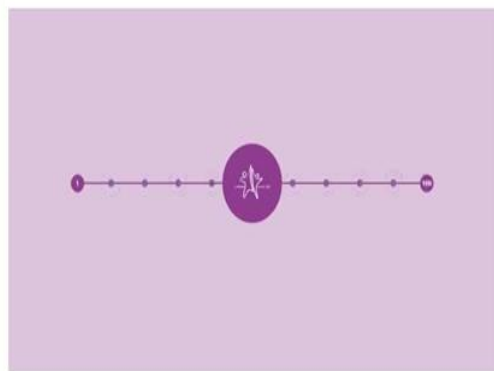(Refer Slide Time: 12:45)

The index also looks at intersecting inequalities which considers the situation of different groups of women and men based on family type, level of education, country of birth, age and disability.

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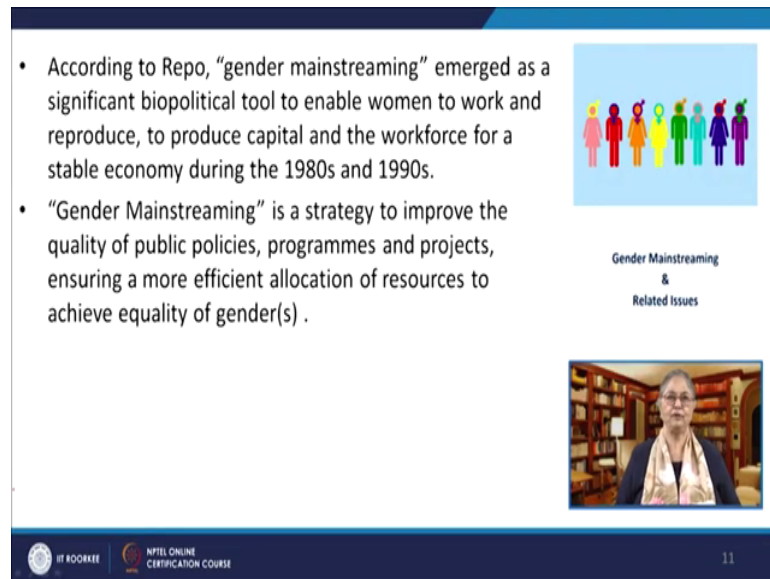
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Each year the gender equality index scores the EU and the member states from 1 to 100. A score of 100 would mean that a country has reached full equality between women and men. Such political interventions focus on establishing equal grounds between the two sexes, to maintain stable capital production and workforce.

In doing so gender is reduced to a mere term devoid of its history and power. In light of this argument feminists argue that the term gender is used as only a token to attract people. Gender mainstreaming and inclusion politics create an illusion of social progress and gender sustainability".

However, Repo does not recognize gender as a brain child of feminism alone, because of this consideration gender has not attained its own genealogy despite being an arena of political struggle since its inception. Critics like Judith Butler, Elizabeth Wheat and Clare Hemmings etcetera have raised objections to this practice of tokenism to promote equality of sexes, that is only the males and the females.

The LGBTQIA plus community does not encourage such mainstreaming and feels that the plurality of gender is frequently dismissed within it.

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Repo feels that, "gender mainstreaming" emerged as a significant biopolitical tool to enable women to work and reproduce, to produce capital in the workforce for a stable economy during the 80s and 90s. "Gender mainstreaming" is a strategy to improve the quality of public policies, programmes and projects, ensuring a more efficient allocation of resources to achieve equality of genders.

Feminists have expressed reservations about the way in which gender is being incorporated into government policies. As sometimes gender is used only as a synonym for sex. And gender inclusiveness ultimately becomes only a talk about men and women.

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Feminists argue that governmental gender policies appropriate feminist ideals and reduce "gender" to one variable in the name of promoting good governance in the form of equality between men and women as sexes. Therefore, the term "gender" is used as opposed to queer or feminists or LGBTQIA plus community.

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Repo argues that "gender" is mistakenly taken as the brain child of feminism. She states that "gender" is a biopolitical apparatus of power, knowledge control and surveillance; whose deployment precedes its use in feminist theory. It has the genealogy of political

struggle. And therefore, for scientists, feminists, and governments alike, "the idea of gender revolves around the problem of how to govern sex".

For Repo, gender governs bodies, the population, especially the women in a biopolitical sense and she quotes the example of declining fertility rate to explicate her arguments further.

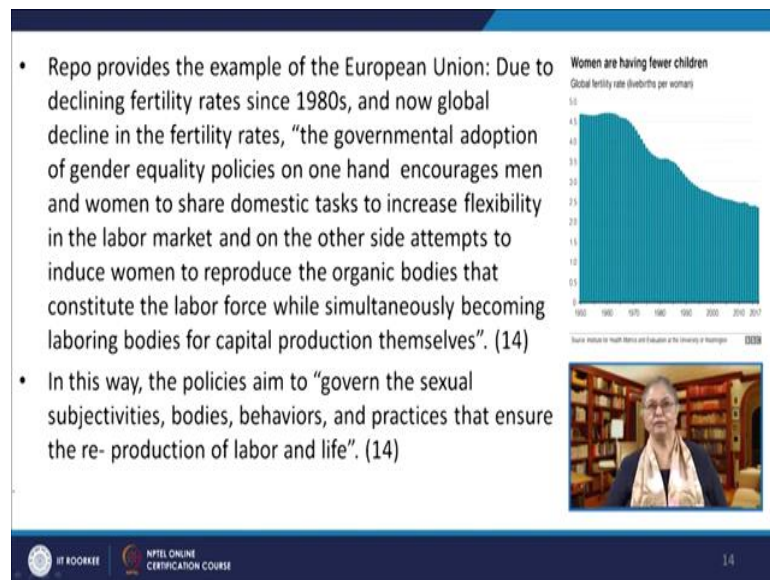(Refer Slide Time: 16:44)

Repo illustrates it with the example of the European Union, due to declining fertility rates since 1980s, which now has become a global decline, "the governmental adoption of gender equality policies on one hand encourage men and women to share domestic tasks to increase flexibility in the labor market and on the other hand they attempt to induce women to reproduce the organic bodies that constitute the labor force while simultaneously becoming labouring bodies for capital production themselves".

In this way, the policies aim to "govern the sexual subjectivities, bodies, behaviours, and practices that ensure the reproduction of labor and life". Repo notes that since biological fertility and reproduction find maximum deployment in public policies and administrative strategies, women are at the center of biopolitical situatedness. However, paradoxically gender-based violence is still at its highest.

Repo suggests that gender-based politics has allowed the academia to decode the genealogy of the deployment of gender. Therefore, a re-examination of gender as a biopolitical apparatus is mandatory. In his work 'Will to Knowledge', Foucault deconstructed the "technology of power" as a scientific discourse and an individual's political, biopolitical situatedness.

Interestingly, the genealogy of gender demonstrates the working of gender in our day-to-day life; for example, in policy making and also through language. Gender is a biopolitical tool with its history of sexuality highlights the emancipatory struggles of the women transsexuals the queers and the others.

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To understand the genealogy of gender one requires to suspend all theories of gender and allow 'unlearning' them while questioning the conditions of knowledge by which gender is produced today.

The idea of gender, underpinned by powerful theories of sex, behaviour, psychology, social order and power, has enabled the perpetual extension of the apparatus of gender into new fields of life such as infrastructure, medicine, technology, environment etcetera. At the level of both the subject, society and practice. For example, urban infrastructure is designed to accommodate men; yet safety is still a major issue for women as well as for other genders

Even though gender has become an essential consideration in planning, infrastructure, safety, education, etcetera men and women translate socioeconomic impacts of gender or genders differently. And a similar assessment can be extended to trans members of our society in the next slide we shall look at a video, which showcases how gender is not just a theoretical construct.

"Gender is a part of our daily lives and practices. And therefore, it should also be a part of our policies and administration.

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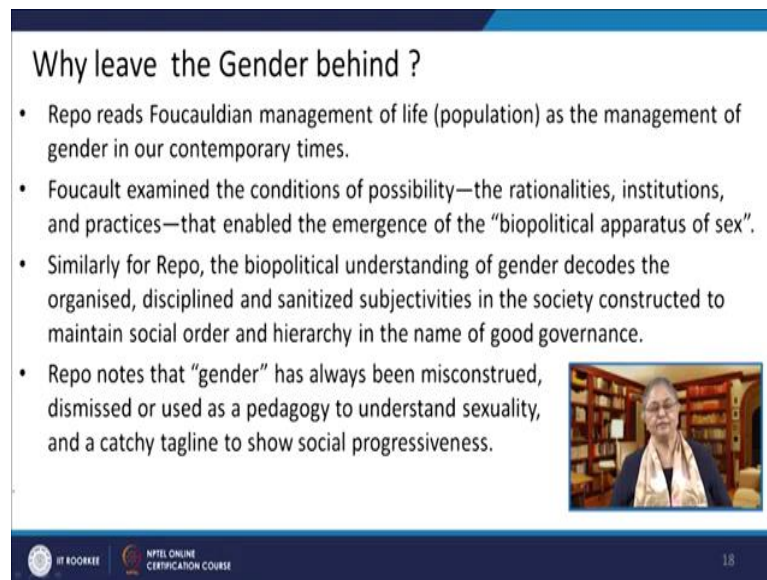
Women and men see infrastructure from different perspectives.

For instance, in transport, surveys show that women's main concern is safety. In London 1 out of 3 women Report having been victims of physical or verbal harassment. In Jakarta, 90 percent of women find the safety of in trains to be poor, compared to only 35 percent of men. Whether you look at transport, energy, sanitation, or digital communications. There are marked differences between the way men and women use them. Yet, from the top down, infrastructure is one of the most male-dominated professions with over 80 of employees being male across all OECD countries. As a result, most of cities and transport grids are generally designed through male eyes. Its costly to have infrastructure that does not take into account the needs of half of the population.

Unsafe transport connections, lack of digital connectivity, inadequate sanitation or lack of access to energy, significantly reduces girls school attendance and women's labor market participation. These lost opportunities also get transmitted to their children and our societies become more polarized. Failing to take into account infrastructure users well-being also increases healthcare costs and contributes to over 7 million premature deaths a year, due to air pollution. Few countries or infrastructure developers take into account the socio-economic and gender implications of their projects in an integrated manner.

Institutional sustainable equity should not be governed by the gender and sexual orientation of people, also for Repo such changes ought to incorporate the genealogy of gender as a distinct field and not reduce it to a token denoting social change and progress or use gender as a replacement for the term sex".

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Repo reads Foucauldian management of life or population as the management of gender in our contemporary times.

Foucault examined the conditions of possibility - the rationalities, institutions, and practices - that enable the emergence of the "biopolitical apparatus of sex". Similarly for Repo, the biopolitical understanding of gender decodes the organized, disciplined and sanitized subjectivities in the society constructed to maintain social order in hierarchy in the name of good governance.

Repo notes that 'gender' has always been misconstrued, dismissed, or used as a pedagogy to understand sexuality and also as a catchy tag line to show social progressiveness. Gender does not recognize its own genealogy, because gender as a construct has been part of theory and not practice or performance during the last 70 years or so.

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Repo therefore, suggests that the, first step towards a genealogy of gender should be the unlearning of gender as a theory, as a social structure, or as a tool of critique. And it cannot be made into the object of analysis as long as it operates as a tool of analysis.

Late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have highlighted the mechanics of gender genealogy due to its entanglement with biopower in biopolitics rendering the aforementioned as an area of research. However, the understanding of gender as a discourse through practice begins at home with family and peers.
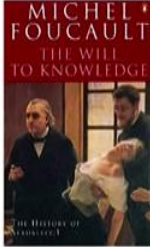
Repo suggests that though a re-reading of the genealogy of gender allows us to differentiate between singularity of sexes and plurality of genders. A more personal understanding of the term is provided by the family system, which is a biopolitical tool of personal administration. The process of socialization is attributed to the family structures, the ideas of masculinity and femininity are primarily shaped by the family in the initial stages of a child's development.

It ensures good governance and morality in a more traditional sense and therefore, we can say that gender is as personal as it is political.

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Foucault notes in 'Will to Knowledge', that familial-sociocultural conditioning allowed biopower to discipline the four figures of the deployment of sexuality in the Victorian era: to quote, "the Malthusian couple, the hysterical woman, the masturbating child and the perverse adult".

This idea has also been supported in 'The Policing of Families' a work published in 1979, where he argues that the family system is designed to socialize children into obedient, productive, healthy and different-sex desiring adults. The family as a biopolitical instrument ensured reproduction and controls sexual behaviour through psychological surveillance, discipline, ideology, repression of its members.

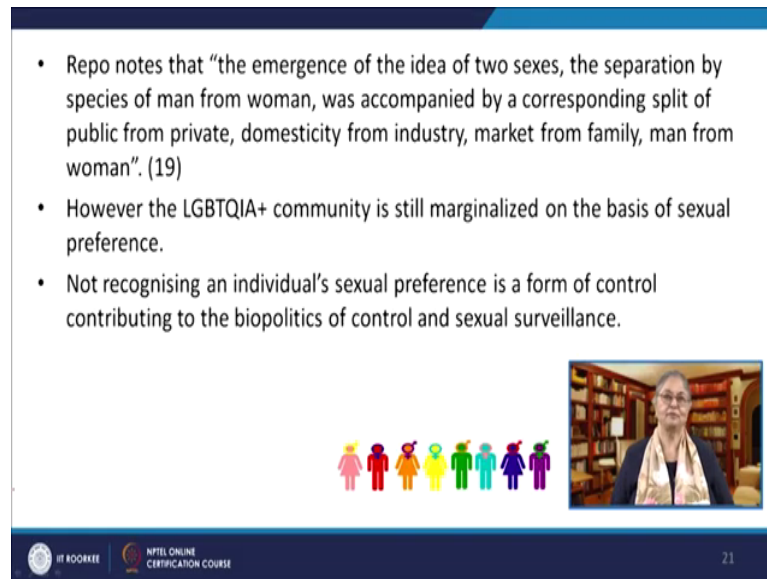The modern sexual division of labor is also instituted through the discourse of sexuality. The repression caused by this is depicted in Atwood's dystopic vision of sexual slavery in her novel, 'The Handmaid's Tale', we would be discussing it in the upcoming modules.

Repo notes that "the emergence of the idea of two sexes, the separation by a species of men from women, was accompanied by a corresponding split of public from private, domesticity from industry, market from family, and men from woman". However, the LGBTQIA plus community is still marginalized on the basis of sexual preference. Not recognizing an individual's sexual preference is a form of control contributing to the biopolitics of control and sexual surveillance.

It can be observed that repression is not just limited to the female counterpart. The biopolitical control over production of labor and reproduction of labor force puts equal pressures on the male counterpart. This aspect of gender has been discussed in weak 9. which took up a scholarship on men's and masculinity studies.

Today the administration of life is psychosocial and so is exploitation, in repression, in control, and ideological formation. In order to decode the genealogy of gender we need to recognize biopolitical violence under the banner of gender equality.

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Repo notes that repression and exploitation are agents of the state. However, their function is not just restricted to administrating life. Biopolitical governmentalities shape different aspects of human life.

And Repo suggest that, "biopolitical discourses, regulations, and mechanisms enable the exploitation of their labor, for example, as domestic servants, wet nurses and nannies and producers of manufactured goods in order to both produce and uphold the domesticated, morally and physically clean, and reproductive female bourgeois subject in the politically rational and economically enterprising male subject".

As we detangle the intertwined genealogies of sex and gender, recognize violence through control, surveillance, moral policing and social conditioning in the name of good governance.

We begin to ask different questions. Some of these questions are listed by Repo and some we will find answers to in the upcoming modules.

Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose in 'Biopower Today' have argued that "sexuality has been de-coupled from its position as the axis between the anatomy-politics of the human body and the biopolitics of the population and that "reproduction itself has become the object of a series of forms of knowledge, technologies, and political strategies that have little to do with sexuality".

Repo asserts that even if we know that gender was conceived in 1950 psychiatry, it is not enough to merely ask how the idea was formed in science. It is also necessary to ask what were the rationalities underpinning its formation and at what kinds of social political and economic projects they were targeted through its use.

The task of genealogy is to examine the history of the way in which things become a problem. The objective is to acknowledge the production of gendered bodies through biopolitical governmentality. However, the idea of control is not just limited to state sanctioned violence it is deeply rooted in the practice of cultural, linguistic and literary socialization.

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In a biopolitical analysis, gender must be scrutinized as an apparatus. Repo opines that we should try to analyse the role of gender in biopolitical governmentality and produce "gender-equal" discourses socially, economically, and culturally to supplement life-function. We should read gender as a practice of socialization and not as a modern replacement first for sex and secondly for sexuality.

The extensive deployment of gender in the field of psychiatry, medicine, feminist theory, queer studies, etcetera is indicative of its shared struggles in the form of sex, in power relationality and intertextualities. Repo feels that the extensive deployment of gender in several fields of policy making is indicative of its shared struggles in the form of sex and power relationality and intertextualities.

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Therefore, the objective is to recognize the complex ways in which gender has been deployed to produce, reproduce and manage human life since 1950, the twenty-first century has allowed us as "subjects" to re-analyze the genealogy of gender through performance, such as drag culture, language.

For example, the use of pronounce through literature especially the speculative fiction and movies, queer cinema, gender inclusive story telling etcetera. Through medicine with the introduction of sex reassignment surgeries, through virtual reality technologies and policy making.

However, the understanding of "gender" as an apparatus of power and biopolitics should still be considered as a new and postmodern phenomenon. In considering gender as a postmodern contestation, one might argue that biopolitics is not an isolated theorization of socio-political control and administration. It finds its relevance in other literary domains as well.

A profound depiction of mechanics of power is found in multiple works of speculative fiction in the form of cautionary tales. The literary discussive conceptualization of biopower through ideology, repression, and violence in considering the biopolitical analysis of gender, will be taken up in the next module.

In the next module, we will discuss gender as paradigm as analyzed by Palmer White, while foregrounding gender as a biopolitical construction in the literary domain of speculative fiction and philosophy.
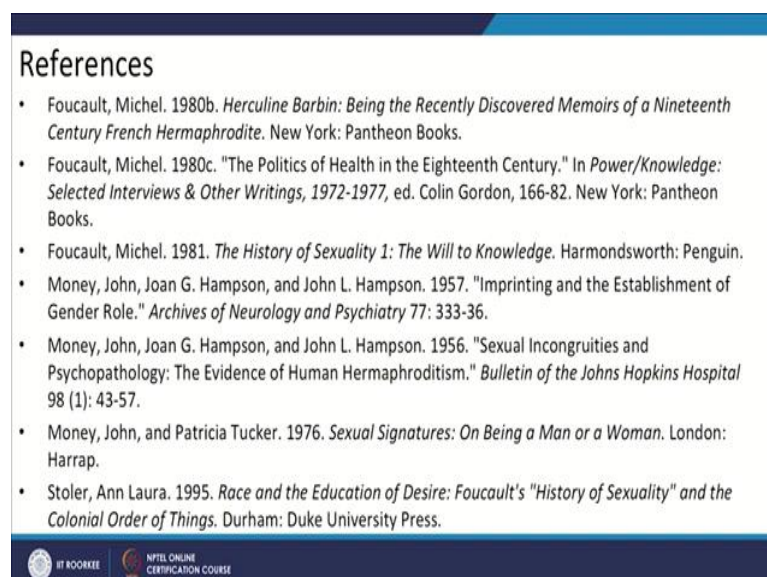
Thank you.

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