

INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATION

# TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN LEADERS

SERIES EDITORS

*Randal Joy Thompson • Chrys Egan • Dionne Rosser-Mims*



# GENDERWASHING IN LEADERSHIP

*Power, Policies and Politics*



*Volume Editors*

**RITA A. GARDINER, WENDY FOX-KIRK, CAROLE J. ELLIOTT AND VALERIE STEAD**

# **Genderwashing in Leadership**

# TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN LEADERS

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The *Transformative Women Leaders* Series is published in collaboration between the International Leadership Association (ILA) and Emerald Publishing. Celebrating women leaders and the leadership styles they employ to achieve success, the books in this series highlight successful context-specific leadership approaches and the moral qualities of endurance. Serving as a model and inspiration for young women leaders entering the workforce and for women leaders currently facing challenges, it provides a community for women leaders around the world.

## **Forthcoming Books**

Embodied Somatic Leadership for Peacebuilding and Protest: Women's Counteroffensive to Violence and Injustice – *Lazarina Topuzova and Randal Joy Thompson*

# **Genderwashing in Leadership: Power, Policies and Politics**

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## Series Foreword

The International Leadership Association (ILA) is pleased to collaborate with Emerald Publishing on *Transformative Women Leaders*, a dynamic exploration of women leaders who are making a difference in their communities and organizations around the world. Providing both inspiration and model, the series delves into the “why” behind these leaders’ journeys, exploring the barriers they face and the unique perspectives and approaches they bring to leadership. These women are not simply overcoming obstacles, they’re redefining what leadership is and demonstrating the power of diverse voices to drive creative innovation and catalyze global transformations that impact the globe’s systemic challenges.

*Transformative Women Leaders* continues the work of the ILA’s groundbreaking series, *Women and Leadership: Research, Theory, and Practice*, which presented cutting-edge research, robust theoretical frameworks, and practical applications that sparked vital dialogue around the advancement of women in leadership. This new series advances the conversation by presenting additional, compelling evidence of women’s unique leadership approaches and their effectiveness in various contexts. These practical examples will further equip women with the knowledge and know-how they need to navigate the leadership landscape. Importantly, *Transformative Women Leaders* will fuel further research into the complexities and intersections of gender and leadership.

Both series were conceived of, led by, and worked on by members of ILA’s Women and Leadership member community, part of ILA’s global community of leaders and leadership researchers, educators, and development specialists who believe that leadership is the key to a just and thriving future for all. We are proud that *Transformative Women Leaders* contributes to advancing the work outlined in ILA’s mission, vision, and purpose and provides an exciting opportunity for people to connect and engage with one another while exploring innovative thinking, creating new resources, and multiplying our collective impact for the good of people and planet.

Cynthia Cherrey  
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## About the Contributors

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*Leadership: New Insights and Contributions from Multiple Perspectives*, Information Age Publishing, 2017, with J. Storberg-Walker) and coedited one journal issue (*Advancing Scholarly Discourse on gender and leadership in higher education*, Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education, 2024, with D. Tillapaugh) on the topic of gender and leadership. In 2018, Paige served as a Fulbright Scholar, conducting research and teaching on topics of leadership at Salzburg University of Applied Sciences in Austria.

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## Series Editor's Preface

As the three editors of the International Leadership Association's (ILA's) new book series *Transformative Women Leaders*, we are pleased to launch our series with *Genderwashing in Leadership: Policies, Practices, and Politics*. The overall intention of our series is to celebrate women leaders of the world working on the cutting edge of the postpandemic era in which paradigms about leadership have shifted and complex global challenges are forcing countries to work together to find innovative solutions. One of the defining qualities of this emerging world is transparency. It has become imperative to pull off the masks of hypocrisy and declare that "things are not always as they are proclaimed to be." This is exactly what the authors of this volume do by exposing genderwashing in several walks of life. As the book editors argue in their working definition of genderwashing, organizational rhetoric "often differs from the affective, embodied experiences of those who work or study in organizations. . .creating the myth of gender equity in the workplace" (p. 2). Moreover, many of the book authors tear down the barriers between rigid academic writing and creative writing that emerges from deep within themselves, exposing them as self-reflective, sometimes vulnerable women. Breaking down such barriers has also become more acceptable in our currently less rigidly demarcated reality. Author Emmanouela Mandalaki unabashedly lauds (p. 9) that.

I am a woman.  
I am a writer.  
I am an academic writer.  
I am a poet.  
I am a feminist.  
I write (about) my body and other bodies.

As a result of exposing rhetorical duplicity and tearing down barriers between the impersonal and the personal, the authors reveal themselves as transformational women leaders, the kind of women that we are intent on applauding in our series. We trust that you will find this volume enlightening and inspiring.

Randal Joy Thompson, Chrys Egan, and Dionne Rosser-Mims

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# Foreword

*Laura L. Bierema*

Kick ‘Em When They’re Up, Kick ‘Em When They’re Down:  
Exposing Dirty Laundry in Leadership and Organization Studies  
– Laura L. Bierema

The provocative chapters in *Genderwashing in Leadership: Policies, Practices, and Politics* delve into contradictions between organizational rhetoric and striving for gender equity, against their sexist, racist, homophobic actions. Don Henley’s (1982) song “Dirty Laundry” kept popping into my mind as I read the book. The lyrics “Kick ‘em when they’re up, kick ‘em when they’re down, kick ‘em all around” exemplify the wretched truth that patriarchal structures are designed to protect white heterosexual men at the expense of all others. Editors Rita A. Gardiner, Wendy Fox-Kirk, Carole J. Elliott, and Valerie Stead expose the harsh reality of genderwashing: Hollow promises and virtue signaling fail to create structural change and equity. *Genderwashing in Leadership* airs this dirty secret, calling out these contradictions in multiple contexts through critique and advocacy for change.

The term “dirty laundry” is traceable to a French proverb: “Il faut laver son linge sale en famille” (Zola, 2023) – “One should wash one’s dirty linen at home.” Dirty laundry refers to unflattering and embarrassing truths people and organizations secretly conceal. *Genderwashing in Leadership* illuminates the dirty laundry behind organizations that genderwash, genderbleach, whitewash, genderspin, rainbowwash, rainbowburn, and silence meaningful structural change efforts for women and other marginalized identities. Genderwashing proclaims gender equity as a virtue but corrodes it in reality.

Genderwashing is not just the disingenuous advocacy of gender equity, but also denials that equity is necessary, or overt arguments that equity seeking is destructive. The early days of the Israel and Hamas war put US women university presidents under scrutiny for responses to antisemitic campus incidents. *New York Times* columnist Kate Zernike wondered why Drs Claudine Gay of Harvard, Sally Kornbluth of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Elizabeth Magill of University of Pennsylvania were the only presidents summoned to testify before Congress. The hearings ultimately resulted in Gay and Magill resigning and pressure from prominent men donors to oust Magill as well. Zernike (2024) mused,

If the question was safety, why didn't Congress summon the (male) presidents of Yale and the University of Chicago, where pro-Palestinian groups occupied quads and administrative offices? Underlying the conversations was the most maddening, familiar and ultimately unanswerable question of all: Would a man have been treated in the same way? (para. 8)

Zernike (2024) quoted Nancy Gernter, law professor at Harvard and retired federal judge, who lamented, "Had there been three men at that table, it would not have gone from 'bad performance' to 'you're not qualified'" (para. 11). The condemnation of only women speaks volumes about powerful elites, mostly men, who are emblematic of the gender discrimination dominating education, government, and business. They are also some of gender equity's loudest critics. The genderwashing of these women presidents exemplifies Thomas et al.'s (2013) illustration of how women of color go from "Pet-to-Threat" as they gain organizational power. Early in their careers, "pets" are regarded less as professionals and treated in childlike ways with guidance on how to behave in and assimilate to dominant culture. As women resist the pet status and gain power, colleagues question their competence, commit microaggressions, and sometimes recast them as "threats."

Perhaps equity backlash no longer qualifies as dirty laundry. Privileged, billionaire white men like Bill Ackman and Elon Musk vocally critique DEI – Diversity Equity and Inclusion. Ackman, who publicly disparaged Harvard President Claudine Gay and worked to oust her for plagiarism once the anti-semitic crisis waned, said he believed DEI is "the root cause of antisemitism at Harvard" (Wei & Tan, 2024). Elon Musk urged "DEI must die" (Kay, 2024).

DEI professionals are vacating their positions twice as fast as those in non-DEI positions, and hiring of diverse workers had declined in companies devaluing DEI (Ayas et al., 2023). Yet, companies with active DEI functions have higher representations of Black, Asian, and Hispanic hires than those without (Ayas et al., 2023). My own institution has expunged DEI from titles, office names, and hiring discussions due to political pressure. Despite all the benefits of a diverse workforce, CEOs' eschewing equity appear asleep at the wheel, especially since companies with DEI teams have higher employee ratings on culture and values, overall rating, and DEI rating (Ayas et al., 2023).

Genderwashing impedes or destroys efforts to achieve equity. Rather than getting the support and power to create structural and demonstrable commitment to increasing workplace equity, DEI professionals are often tasked with the impossible: Single-handedly changing the culture but lacking power to do so while holding racist and sexist leaders accountable for more diverse hiring, equity leadership, and allyship. Sadly, public outcry seems to be the only motivator of change (Mystal, 2023). Paraphrasing Henley's lyrics, it is time to take workplaces' dirty secrets and dirty little lies about gender equity and cut them down to size. Heteropatriarchy does not come out in the wash.

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# Introduction

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The motivation for this book is our frustration, and sometimes anger, about the gaps between organizational rhetoric and the affective, embodied experiences of women in leadership roles. While there are those who say that gender equity has been achieved, pointing to evidence such as a greater number of women-identifying students in higher education (NCES, 2020), and the increase in women leaders across different sectors, these statistics do not tell the full story. These and other quantitative measures do not help us understand the reasons why gender inequities persist in many workplaces. A biennial review of gender challenges facing organizations in the United Kingdom (Pecis et al., 2022), for instance, shows how inequalities in the labor market between men and women persist with continuing gender gaps evident in pay, insecure employment, decision-making and leadership roles. As researchers and practitioners, we need new tools to help us deal with these persistent problems. The concept of genderwashing can help us interrogate these ongoing gender inequities, and the ongoing social, political, and cultural reasons why gender inequities persist.

The purpose of this book is to present a research agenda on the concept of genderwashing, and illustrate its relevance for leadership and organization studies. The idea for the book came from our diverse experiences as researchers who focus on leadership, gender and equity issues. In recent years, we began to notice a new trend in organizations. We watched the development of equity policies and practices across work sectors. One aim of such initiatives was to bring about improvement in women's promotional chances, pay and experiences. Unfortunately, there is often a disjuncture between organizational rhetoric and women's lived experiences (Fox-Kirk et al., 2020). On the one hand, we have seen legislation invoked against attempts to eradicate differences by conservative politicians, who accuse proponents of equity change as having a "woke agenda." On the other hand, feminist critiques have shown how many organizations adopt

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**Genderwashing in Leadership, 1–7**

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a performative approach, whereby their rhetoric of inclusion differs from workplace realities for many workers (Ahmed, 2007, 2021). What this means, in practical terms, is that some leaders focus more on superficial ways of appearing to create more equitable organizations, rather than addressing the underlying structures and power imbalances that cause inequities to flourish (Debebe, this volume; Mavin, this volume). The term that captured this process is genderwashing; a term first used by Martha Burke (2011). We thus decided to turn our research spotlight on genderwashing.

Our first step was to develop a working definition of genderwashing (Fox-Kirk et al., 2020). We defined genderwashing as the process whereby organizational rhetoric differs from the affective, embodied experiences of those who work or study in organizations. What this theory/practice gap does is to create the myth of gender equity in the workplace. This myth reveals how structural power inequities lie at the heart of inequitable genderwashing practices, due to masculinist, heteronormative, organizational structures enacted through policies, procedures, and norms. Genderwashing represents an analytical concept that researchers and practitioners can use to not only critique the persistence of gender-based discrimination in leadership and organizations but also to suggest possibilities for change.

This book represents the next step in the development of genderwashing as a critical concept. We have gathered together researchers from diverse disciplines to help us map the landscape of genderwashing theoretically, and begin dialogues that we hope will inspire researchers and practitioners to challenge genderwashing practices. We wanted to encourage depth and breadth of dialogue on the topic of genderwashing. Hence, we invited scholars from diverse areas such as leadership studies, organizational and management studies, sociology, education, Human Resource Development (HRD), International Development and Gender Studies to consider how using genderwashing as a theoretical or analytical tool serves to expose the subtle, and not so subtle, biases in organizational policies and procedures. Of particular interest is to discover the epistemological assumptions that underpin and sustain genderwashing practices, and how those practices intersect with aspects of embodiment, intersectionality, and power. In turn, these genderwashing policies and practices continue to restrict the advancement of women and other Marginalized and Minority Groups (MMG).

Although gender is the primary focus, our intention is to explore the underlying mechanisms of bias and discrimination for all marginalized identities. This means recognizing the role that intersectionality plays in bias and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; Ngujiri & Gardiner, 2017). For example, several chapters in this volume highlight how the development of gender equity and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies and processes fail to adequately deal with ongoing structural organizational problems that lead to discrimination, bias, and mistreatment (Debebe, this volume; Haber-Curran et al., this volume). One ongoing problem, as Sara Ahmed (2007) shows, is that organizations can appear to “do the document while failing to do the doing.” That is, there is often a gap between leadership and organizational pronouncements about workplace equity and everyday workplace reality for many

workers. These pronouncements highlight a desire for organizations to engage in equity and fairness in their practices. And yet discrimination, bias and mistreatment persist not just in organizations but also in some corporations' global operations that have damaging consequences for girls and women, especially in the Global South (Walters, this volume). Whenever false equity discourses are unquestioned, there is a danger of deepening inequities. Genderwashing is one avenue of inquiry for researchers and practitioners to engage with in their work that can reveal and call to account the disconnection between organizational intention and everyday lived experience.

This edited collection presents cutting-edge scholarship on genderwashing from a diverse group of scholars and practitioners from different sociopolitical and cultural contexts. This cultural diversity is important because it adds richness to current research on gender and leadership. The contributions here lay the groundwork for future scholarship and practice in understanding how genderwashing works in organizations and societies. The volume begins with a Foreword by the Critical Human Resource Development (CHRD) scholar, Laura L. Bierema, Professor of Adult Education (University of Georgia). With over 160 publications, her work is well-known to gender and leadership scholars. The volume ends with an Afterword by Gina Grandy, Dean of the Haskayne School of Business (University of Calgary), who is a respected scholar in gender and stigma at work. Their valuable insights illustrate why genderwashing resonates with scholars and practitioners alike.

We have organized this volume into three different areas. The first focuses on affective, embodied experience, and how our sense of self can be affected negatively by organizational practices. As an example, our first chapter by Emmanouela Mandalaki melds feminist phenomenology with French feminist theory to explore the culture of higher education and why it is increasingly difficult for scholars to do research that speaks to personal matters. Moreover, too much time spent on administrative tasks means that it becomes too easy for one's research to be set aside. But when we say we are too busy to write, we may not feel the necessity to state our personal truth. Writing this short poignant chapter is Emmanouela's creative micro step toward organizational change. She is practicing a form of what Ann Cunliffe (2022, p. 19) describes as "sensuous theorizing" that emerges from our personal experiences, but that also resonates with others.

That resonance is also apparent in our second chapter by Sharon Mavin. She adopts the methodology of memory work to look at structural and interpersonal violence in UK business schools. To ensure the safety of those sharing their stories with her, Sharon uses composite narratives to build her argument. What is exposed through the sharing of these narratives is the ongoing everyday micro- and macro-practices that shore up masculine spaces, and perpetuate organizational microaggressions. These narratives thus illustrate an organizational environment that privileges patriarchal, neoliberal ways of being to the detriment of other ways of leading and being. Sharon introduces the term "genderbleaching" to show how organizations continue to enable abuse against women in the workplace.

In our third chapter, Maylon Hanold moves away from higher education to focus on workplace encounters more generally. By looking at microlevel interactions between managers and their staff, she argues that performance reviews, once considered the gold standard by Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals, may not be that helpful. Rather, it is the unremarkable moments that may be much more of a catalyst to effective organizational change. These moments may also help to develop a stronger relationship between manager and staff. Such encounters, Maylon tells us, are always enmeshed within social norms, such as gender inequity. Using genderwashing as a conceptual lens helps us to begin the disruption of power dynamics that work toward sustaining gender hierarchies.

In the second part of our collection, the focus is on organizational norms and hierarchical power structures. The chapter by Liza Howe-Walsh, Victoria Pagan and Susan Kirk explores genderwashing by examining three accrediting agencies of business schools. They argue that accrediting agencies are powerful stakeholders in charge of global standards that business leaders then incorporate into their workplace. These accrediting bodies exert a strong influence on the behavior of leaders, shown in structures and processes that contribute to genderwashing. Further, accrediting agencies contribute to what they define as “genderspinning.” This “spinning” is a way to present a favorable impression while also moving in an endless circle that thwarts meaningful change. The rhetoric of accreditation agencies shows a failure to provide business schools with enough guidance toward moving closer to gender equity.

Paige Haber-Curran, Adrian L. Bitton, and Natasha T. Turman turn their attention to EDI initiatives, which they examine through the lens of intersectionality. These scholars illustrate how institutions use equity and justice as a way to put forward surface-level solidarity statements. As an example, they discuss how organizations use a black square on social media spaces or send e-mails supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, rather than looking at the ways in which whiteness in organizations is an ongoing problem. For Paige and her colleagues, genderwashing is a considerable barrier to organizational equity that inhibits the ability to effect organizational change. In their in-depth examination of the effects of gender-based affinity groups on organizational cultures, they call for institutional leaders to work toward deeper, and more meaningful change.

But for change to happen, we need to be cautious of the ways in which popular discourses in HRD can serve to cover over power inequities in the workplace. Gelaye Debebe’s chapter introduces us to the concept of Defensive Diversity Management (DDM). She examines how this practice operates as a tool of genderwashing that enables organizations to fend off criticism through a symbolic way of dealing with DEI initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Gelaye outlines how using a genderwashing framework can reveal the contradiction between symbolic ways that US

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<sup>1</sup>In the United States, DEI is the common acronym for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in organizations where other countries use EDI or EDID, as in Canada, to acknowledge the ongoing need for decolonialization.

organizations adopt EDI initiatives, and the uncomfortable reality of workplace inequities. She also examines the discourse of “talent management,” which serve to reinforce workplace inequity. In doing so, Gelaye shines a light on hierarchical categorization that results in human resources (HR) practitioners wanting to recruit and develop “stars” while ignoring “work horses.” This is an example of what Chris Argyris (1986) called the defensive routine, and serves to illustrate an incongruity between what organizations espouse and what they practice. What we learn is that, for many organizations, the notion of “talent” is synonymous with power, and serves to perpetuate organizational hierarchies and inequities. In sum, it is through challenging how organizational power operates that we learn just how insidious it can be (Ahmed, 2021).

The insidiousness of organizational power inequities is taken up in our next chapter; this time in the context of genderwashing in sports. Specifically, Hayley Baker and Jennifer Chisholm explore Hockey Canada’s response to serious allegations of sexual violence against young hockey players. They argue that media allegations of sexual assault carried out by some players in the junior men’s hockey team served as a catalyst that exposed Hockey Canada’s genderwashing practices of silencing victims. Hockey Canada’s silencing tactics included secret financial settlements to the victim/survivor, and the use of nondisclosure agreements to keep these allegations from appearing in public. Through their media analysis, Hayley and Jennifer show how this organizational attempt to silence people resulted in a culture of silence, poor leadership, and a normalization of violence that would eventually lead to a media and public backlash, as well as political and police investigations to uncover the full extent of these negative genderwashing practices.

Our final four chapters are notable in applying genderwashing to a range of cultural and political contexts. The first of these chapters is by Tuba Javaid, Rita A. Gardiner, and Kasey Egan, who explore genderwashing in Pakistani higher educational institutions through the introduction of a sexual harassment policy. Their policy analysis indicates that there is a distinct difference between what the policies state and what takes place in organizations. These contradictions are interwoven with cultural beliefs. They tease out some of these contradictions showing how they are underpinned by societal, institutional and gender norms within Pakistan. In sum, Javaid et al. illustrate how using genderwashing as a conceptual lens enables us to perceive how policies are gendering practices that position men and women in different ways (Bacchi, 2017).

The next chapter by Mustafa F. Özbilgin and Cihat Erbil examines the diverse effects that legislation in Turkey and the Netherlands has had on LGBT+ communities, as well as identifying the practices of rainbow washing and rainbow burning. They take up the sociological term “strategies of ignorance” to highlight the ways in which different societies have instrumentalized notions of inclusion. This type of instrumentalization is a way for organizations and governments to appear to be inclusive. Yet this inclusiveness is superficial, leading to societal and organization prejudices remaining unchanged despite legislative edicts and policy changes.

The final two chapters turn the spotlight on the gap between international corporations' public pronouncements about gender equity in the Global North and the effects these corporations are having in their day-to-day operations in the Global South. Natalie Jester's chapter examines the connections between genderwashing and militarization. First, she focuses on the performative ways in which women in the military are presented to provide a particular image, and examines how sex, gender, and feminism are employed by martial organizations to show themselves as socially progressive. Second, she explores the harms caused when military organizations make appeals to equity, fairness, and agency but ignore their role in harming women, especially in security operations in the Global South.

In the final chapter, Rosie Walters looks at genderwashing in relation to girl power. She contends that using genderwashing as an analytical tool can help us discern the differences between corporate speak and action. Specifically, Rosie explores the contradictions when corporations partner with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to develop girls' education. Examining *Applebee's* sponsorship of the Malala Fund, and *Caterpillar Inc's* partnership with Girl Up, she argues that these amount to transnational forms of genderwashing that are designed to alleviate public concern in the Global North while doing little to address harm experienced by girls and women in the Global South. A key contribution of this chapter is to show how a feminist postcolonial and post-structural approach to genderwashing allows researchers to explore the gendered and neocolonial politics of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) across a corporation's global operation. What Rosie's chapter uncovers is the many contradictions between the programs targeted at Global North audiences, and how women and girls are treated by a corporation's everyday operations in the Global South.

We are delighted with the theoretical depth, methodological diversity, and cultural insights that these authors have presented. Each chapter provides us with new ways of thinking that help us understand how genderwashing, and other forms of discrimination, impacts organizational and everyday life.

In one of our early editorial meetings, Wendy shared the problem of the kitchen sink in project management. That is, there is always something unforeseen that happens despite extensive planning. During the compilation of this edited collection, Rita broke her wrist and thus became this project's "kitchen sink" problem. As a result, Rita wondered how the book could be completed on time. But Wendy rose to the kitchen sink challenge, ensuring that we stayed on track, while Carole and Valerie provided much emotional support and editorial wisdom. We were also fortunate to have an excellent relationship with the staff at Emerald; special thanks go to editor Kirsty Woods for seeing the value of our book proposal. We also wish to express our thanks to Randal Thompson, Chrys Egan, and Dionne Rosser-Mimms for being such supportive series editors. Their new series on women in leadership, in partnership with the International Leadership Association, is sorely needed, and we are proud to be the first book in the series.

Finally, we need, as Raewyn [Connell \(2019\)](#) tells us, to constantly critique and challenge organizational and societal injustices. This collection is our attempt to

do that by encouraging leaders, scholars, and practitioners to think about these injustices, and the ways in which genderwashing may help shine a light on these problems so as to effect meaningful change.

Rita, Wendy, Carole and Valerie.

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