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“Too many years lost in History”: an analysis of *Six! The Musical* through the lens of Fourth-wave Feminism and the #MeToo Movement

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Abstract

When discussing the historic representation the wives of Henry VIII have had throughout history, it is unavoidable to conclude that little is known about them apart from their connection with the king. In short, the roles of these women have been minimized to six words from a popular children's rhyme: "Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived". In an attempt to challenge this narrative, the British musical *Six* (2017), directed by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss, re-writes and highlights the queens' stories with the objective of establishing links between their mistreatments and women's present-day context. The musical manages to do this by re-telling the queens' stories from a perspective that distances itself from the male gaze and establishing parallels with present-day artists while creating an apparent competition between them in which the queens will crown the winner. It is my contention that *Six!* can be considered a feminist text with connections to fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement, as the queens narrate their stories of abuse, but also of empowerment. For this reason, the different ways in which the text relates to feminism will be discussed here in order to prove whether the musical can be considered a feminist product.

Keywords: Empowerment, history, Henry VIII's wives, Fourth-wave Feminism, contemporary pop artists.

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‘A Story that You Think You’ve Heard Before’

The Tudor dynasty has been established as one of the most popular and recognized periods in English history. This is not surprising if the hundreds of works the period has inspired and the number of authors that have created content related to it are taken into consideration. In short, from novels to TV shows, the Tudor era is not one historic period short of representation in the media. Concretely, these adaptations tend to focus on Henry VIII’s reign, a king better known for his tumultuous marriage history. Most famously, and to exemplify how turbulent of an era this was, the king’s divorce attempt from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, marked the inauguration of the Church of England, placing the king as Head of the Church. As British historian, G. W. Bernard argues ‘Henry’s quarrel with the pope was thus straightforwardly a dispute over jurisdiction, namely who determined the legitimacy of the king of England’s marriages, rather than a matter of grand constitutional principle’ (Bernard 2016, 203). But this is just one example of the king’s mistreatment of his wives when he decided he no longer wanted to be married to them. Throughout his life, Henry VIII married six women. These six wives were Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr and they all suffered the mistreatment of a king who quickly turned on them as soon as he lost interest. As a consequence, the lives of these women and their accomplishments tend to be reduced to their role as Henry VIII’s wives, as one of six. In essence, the portrait of these women that has prevailed throughout history is marked by the historical period in which they were born and its patriarchal values, (Lipscomb 2022, 106) as what we know of the queens' stories comes always in relation to the figure of the king.

One of the latest re-interpretations of this crucial time in English history is *Six*, a British-born musical written and directed by University of Cambridge students Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss. This musical premiered in 2017 and can be considered a feminist reinterpretation and rewriting of Henry VIII’s wives’ stories (Clough 2019). The musical received both the critics’ and the public’s approval and it quickly became popular around the globe, with shows in major cities such as London and New York. In addition, even the conception of the show is unique, as it does not follow the usual structure of a prototypical musical. Still, it is rather presented as a pop concert by the hand of the six queens. In doing so, the authors are messing with the musical format with the intention of making it more engaging and captivating (Holden 2018). In consequence, the queens are characterized by taking inspiration from present-day artists such as Beyonce, Rihanna, Adele, and Ariana Grande. This distinctive form contributes to the portrayal of the musical’s main concern, as

co-creator Lucy Moss states, which was to ‘‘make a statement about women’s experiences in the present day, rather than delving too deeply into the dry facts and figures’’ (Sydney Opera House 2019). In my judgment, by modernizing the historical figures the authors are making their experiences relatable and understandable for today’s public and that, combined with the format the authors choose to present the show, helps the musical be described as a feminist text. This is because the rewriting of the queen’s stories is first presented as an apparent competition between the queens to crown ‘‘the winner’’, or the one who suffered the most during her time married to Henry VIII. This competition is later revealed to be a façade, a device to help the queens narrate their stories, a fact that marks one of the moments where the solidarity between the queens is shown. It is my contention that the musical can be described as a feminist text that can be related to fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement as the queens’ bond and narrate the mistreatment and the abuse they suffered during their lifetimes. The musical, then, offers a modernized rewriting of history, away from the male gaze, that emphasizes the empowerment of women and the necessity for them to stand together in solidarity against oppression and the patriarchal values that draws them as rivals.

In order to understand the role the musical plays in relation to fourth-wave feminism and the empowerment of women, different aspects of the musical and the historical period in which the queens lived are going to be analysed. First of all, the historical context is going to be introduced, as well as the queens’ position at the time to better understand their story and to study how the musical defies the historical representation of these women. This will also help exemplify how the queens’ stories and legacies were and still are minimized to being the wives of the king and the implications of this (Clough 2019). Secondly, the connections between the queens and contemporary pop artists will be examined while also commenting on how the costumes of the queens are reconceptualized to fit both the historical period and the pop artists they are connected to. The lack of a character to represent the king is also going to be commented on as a tool to distance the musical from the male gaze and to put the emphasis on the queens. The similarities between the queens and the singers are going to be described as a tool to give significance to the values of empowerment and to make the issue relatable to today’s public. This will help highlight or make visible the conditions women still have to fight against, which are not so different from the conditions the queens had to endure in the sixteenth century. By doing this, the musical emphasizes the constant fight and judgment women subject each other to even today and promotes the ideal of solidarity. This will be tackled in my third section, where the so-called competition the

show sets its premise on will be examined. The aims of fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement, a movement that encourages women to come forward and narrate their stories of abuse at the hands of men, are also going to be studied in relation to this fictitious competition. To prove my thesis, I will use different sources in my analysis. These sources are coming from women's studies, cultural studies, and musical studies and will be related to the source text, the story of the queens, and the pop artists.

‘Divorced, Beheaded, Died, Divorced, Beheaded, Survived’

‘Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived’ (Marlow and Moss 2019): the musical opens with the popular English children's rhyme, a rhyme that minimizes the queens' stories to just six words and limits them to the way in which their marriage with the king ended. This rhyme is proof of how unreliable the representation of these women has been throughout history, as it is important to remember that the queens lived in a patriarchal society in which the word that prevailed was that of the king (Lipscomb 2022, 106). Moreover, a woman's role during the sixteenth century was mainly to procure an heir to the throne, and as Henry VIII had an ‘increasing obsession with the need for a male heir’ (Shore 1972, 370), he blamed his wives for not fulfilling what he believed to be ‘their royal and marital duty’ (Shrimplin and Jayasena 2021, 155). It is unavoidable to conclude, then, that history is androcentric. For this reason, the description we have of the queens comes always in relation to their time married to the king, and ‘Henry's point of view has, of course, dominated’ (Lipscomb 2022, 106). Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first and longest marriage, is described to be a pious woman who refused to divorce the king and who died believing their marriage was legitimate. Anne Boleyn is depicted as an adulterous witch who caused the English reformation due to her manipulation techniques and who celebrated Catherine of Aragon's death, feeding the stereotype of women being competitive with each other when trying to find a husband and leading to her public beheading. Jane Seymour, on the other hand, is known as ‘the only one he truly loved’ (Marlow and Moss 2019) and is pictured as a saint precisely for birthing a male heir and dying in the process. Anne of Cleves is remembered as the woman that the king divorced because of her looks; while Katherine Howard is represented as sultry and adulterous, a fact that seemed to justify her beheading. Lastly, Catherine Parr symbolized the nurse, the one who outlived him, the one who survived. The role of the musical as a feminist work starts with its exploration of this issue. *Six* exemplifies how history is subjected to the male gaze in different instances. For example, in the first song, the authors already discuss how the picture that has been created of these

women may not be entirely truthful, mentioning the stereotypes that have been perpetuated about these women: “All you ever hear and read about, is our ex and the way it ended” (Marlow and Moss 2019).

The musical, then, plays with the stereotypes associated with these women through the songs each of the queens sings to offer a modernized re-writing of their stories that paints them in a different light and changes the perception history has created of them. In the case of Catherine of Aragon, the authors chose to centre her song on the moment she gave her speech at Blackfriars in London when defending her marriage to King Henry VIII as legitimate, to show her defiance. Queen Catherine of Aragon, the king’s first and longest marriage, was the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain and was raised to be a queen, being educated at the Spanish court. It is important to remember that before being married to Henry VIII, Catherine was married to his brother, Arthur. After Arthur’s death, she faced the mistreatments of King Henry VII, who disregarded her as not useful without a complete dowry after the death of her mother. When his father died and apparently as he had wished on his death bed, Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon and had what seemed to be a happy marriage “until it did not produce and heir” (Toy-Caron 2020, 3), or at least, not a male heir, as Catherine and Henry had a daughter, Mary, for whose rights and status Catherine fiercely fought while Henry VIII was trying to get their annulment. In *No Way*, Catherine’s song, the extra-marital affairs of Henry are made explicit, referencing Henry’s bastard son with the line “And even though you had one son with someone who don’t own a wedding ring” (Marlow and Moss 2019) and his infatuation with Anne Boleyn “You must think that I’m crazy, you wanna replace me, baby, there’s no way” (Marlow and Moss 2019). At the same time, the song quotes the apparent triviality on which Henry based his claim about the invalidity of their marriage:

“So you read a bible verse that I’m cursed

'Cause I was your brother's wife

You say it's a pity 'cause quoting Leviticus

"I'll end up kidiless all my life"

Well, daddy weren't you there, when I gave birth to Mary? (Marlow and Moss 2019)

The song’s tone and lyrics put Catherine’s story under the spotlight and relate to fourth-wave feminism as it focuses on her empowerment, directly reflecting on her determination and strength when facing Henry VIII’s decision to divorce her and cast her aside.

The second, and possibly the most well-known, wife of Henry VIII was Anne Boleyn, an English lady in waiting for Catherine who was raised in France. The controversy of her character lies in the fact that she is said to have manipulated Henry into divorcing Catherine. As philosopher Susan Bordo argues, ‘‘It is often assumed that Anne, in encouraging Henry’s pursuit, was motivated solely by personal (or perhaps familial) ambition, while Henry was bewitched by her sexual allure’’ (Bordo 2013, 14). Thus, she is often represented as a witch and an adulterous woman, removing the guilt from a king who mistreated his first wife and separated her from her only daughter. What needs to be taken into consideration, however, is that after her execution, many of Anne Boleyn’s documents were destroyed, as Henry wanted to erase her from the court. As a consequence, what we know about her is mainly based on biased observers (Solly). Boleyn’s song in the musical can also be related to fourth-wave feminism and the #Metoo Movement, as it references her fate and the abuse she suffered in its same title: ‘‘Don’t Lose Your Head’’. The song also references the break from Rome, the instauration of the Church of England, and Anne’s negative to sleep with Henry until he married her: ‘‘We’re so outdated, us two wanted to get X-Rated, soon excommunicated’’ (Marlow and Moss 2019). In addition, the stanza ‘‘Henry’s out every night on the town/ Just sleeping around, like what the hell?/If that’s how it’s gonna be/Maybe I’ll flirt with a guy or three’’ (Marlow and Moss 2019) highlights the double standards between men and women at the time, as Henry VIII was known to have many mistresses but accused her wife of adultery and incest, a fact that led to her beheading. The authors state that they ‘‘view the number as a playful response to historians’ continued vilification of the queen as ‘‘calculating and manipulative’’ (Solly 2021)

Henry’s third wife was Jane Seymour, a lady in waiting to Anne Boleyn often described as the only wife the king loved due to her giving him a son but dying at childbirth. In consequence, her song is a ballad. However, the queen also managed to use her position to support different causes, such as helping Henry’s daughters. In her song, ‘‘Heart of Stone’’ the volatility of Henry is referenced, ‘‘You’d lift me up, or let me fall’’, emphasizing the patriarchal society in which the queens lived and how they were subjected to the power of men. The song also highlights the pressure queens had to endure to procure a male heir to the throne, ‘‘Without my son your love could disappear’’. Thus, Jane Seymour’s value as a good wife depended solely on her giving Henry a son, due to this and her apparent submissive character she was stereotyped as a saint, the perfect wife. Her role in the musical also relates to fourth-wave feminism, as the authors declared in an interview: ‘‘The idea was about the strength of choosing to love someone and committing to someone, and that being

an equally valid feminist experience.” (McHenry 2020). It is noteworthy that it is in this song that one of the first instances of sorority or solidarity between the queens is shown, as they all join in the chorus, promoting the idea of sisterhood between the queens, as they have shared experiences and they have all suffered the mistreatments of the king (Gamble 206, 298).

After Jane Seymour’s death, the king decided to marry Anne of Cleves after seeing her portrait and for political reasons. Later on, he decided he did not like her and wanted to get an annulment under the statement that the marriage had not been consummated. However, “that Anne of Cleves is remembered as the ugly ‘Flanders Mare’ is a triumph of Henry(...) and a measure of his power over the narrative, even centuries later” (Lipscomb 2022, 106). For this reason, instead of focusing on her time married to the king, the authors chose to focus the song on what happened to Anne of Cleves after she got the annulment, as she began to be considered “the king’s beloved sister” and was granted the Richmond Palace as a place of residence, “that’s why Anna’s song is a celebration” (Wright 2019). The song, thus, references Anne’s riches and the fact that she remained unmarried for the rest of her life: “Sittin’ here all alone, On a throne, In a palace that I happen to own (Marlow and Moss 2019).

Katherine Howard was the next woman to marry the king. As mentioned before, she has been described as a wanton woman who had different lovers during her marriage to Henry, a fact that cost her her head. The age difference between her and Henry, however, should be taken into consideration when discussing their relationship. Katherine was much younger than Henry, merely a teenager that was taken advantage of by men before and after marrying the king. However, history has painted her as an adulterous woman instead of a victim of abuse. For this reason, the authors decided to focus Katherine’s song on the abuse she suffered, “start(ing) out with a “sexy, seductive” tone before transforming into a “narrative of abuse” with echoes of today’s #MeToo Movement” (Solly 2021). Thus, the song narrates the abuse Howard suffered at the hands of different men who took advantage of her young age in verses such as “He was 23, And I was 13 going on 30” (Marlow and Moss 2019).

The last of the queens to marry Henry VIII was Catherine Parr, the one who survived. She fulfils the stereotype of the nurse, as Henry was suffering from different ailments due to his age and lifestyle. In the musical, she refuses to be defined just as Henry’s wife and exemplifies the value of empowerment by stating that that is not her story, that she is much more than that. The song refers to the way in which women were subjected to male power:

“Never had a choice” (Marlow and Moss 2019). This song also sets the tone for the musical’s finale where the queens end their fake competition and shows another moment of solidarity and companionship between the queens when they unite and sing together. Consequently, the song helps change the mood of the show, emphasizing the empowerment of women and the necessity for them to stand together against oppression and the patriarchal values of the society they live in.

“The Historemix”

The musical is not considered a feminist text related to fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement just because it features the story of the queens, but also because it reinterprets them as current feminine pop artists. By comparing and juxtaposing both sides, the queens become more understandable and relatable to today’s public, as queens and kings can be considered to be the celebrities of their time. This is done to call attention to the fact that women still are subjected to a set of consequences indirectly and directly imposed by the patriarchal society they live in. In addition, this also gives importance to the necessity for them to stand together in solidarity. To create the characters of the queens, the authors took inspiration from different singers. Catherine of Aragon is inspired mainly by Beyoncé and also by other artists such as Jennifer Hudson and Jennifer Lopez. Concretely, the authors comment that Catherine’s inspiration came from *Lemonade-era* Beyoncé, an album that focuses on infidelity. In that album, Beyoncé “through mourning, anger, and eventually empowerment, learns to love herself and demand equity” (Harris-Perry 2016, 128), a fact that can be connected to Catherine of Aragon’s speech at Blackfriars and her relationship with Henry after he was infatuated with Anne Boleyn. Beyoncé can also be related to Catherine of Aragon in “her subversion of patriarchal power (which) has allowed her to occupy a unique space within the pop-cultural milieu as a transgressive, powerful figure” (Olutola 2019, 100), so both the queen and the singer were in the public sphere and stood against the oppression and the mistreatment of their partners with whom they had a long-term relationship. To represent these connections, the final version of the queen’s costume shown in the musical combines both Beyoncé’s and Catherine’s stories. The gold on her dress can represent both the common colour used by Beyoncé and her dancers or the metal people in Tudor times used to represent power and prestige. The spikes on her head, on the other hand, are used to symbolize her divorce, but spikes of the same style have also been worn by Beyoncé in different concerts.

Anne Boleyn, on the other hand, is modelled after Lily Allen and Avril Lavigne because the authors wanted to change her traditional representation: “Traditionally she’s taken very seriously, so we wanted to flip that on its head” (Wright 2019). Consequently, the style of the song is more light-hearted in a way that makes Anne the trouble-maker on the stage. The scrutiny Anne Boleyn was subjected to can be related to the pressure the press put on Allen, as she had a tense relationship with the journalists (Lynskey 2016). In reference to her costume, its colour is green to establish a connection with “Greensleaves”, a poem supposedly written about Boleyn. The character also wears a B necklace as Anne Boleyn did, but as a choker as a symbol of her decapitation. To showcase its more carefree style, her dress and hairstyles are also more relaxed, to give “her a lighter touch, but with a sassy edge” (Wright 2019).

In opposition, Adele is the inspiration for Jane Seymour as a tool to portray her tragic history. The queen’s song is a ballad, Adele’s famous music style, that heartbreakingly recounts Jane’s relationship as the one he truly loved but also comments on the fact that this love came directly connected to their son. In spite of that, her solo is full of impressive high notes to denote that the queen was also strong, albeit not as fierce as other wives (Clough 2019). Her costume goes in accordance with her style, as she is the most modest of the queens and wears the least revealing outfit with white tones which are a symbol of the attributes of purity and innocence often associated with her. Nonetheless, it is clear that her message of obligated support to the king resonates with all the queens as they join in the chorus, one of the examples of solidarity between the queens in the musical. Before the introduction of the next queen, however, there is a short tune to exemplify how Henry decided who his next wife was going to be, as he sent a painter to different European regions to paint him a picture of his next wife. This song also offers an actualized re-writing of history, as it parodies the events, comparing Holbein’s paintings to Tinder. Thus, this song is also an example of how the show makes the stories of the queens more relatable to today’s public.

After Jane Seymour’s melodic ballad, there is a complete change of pace with Anne of Cleves’ song as a result of the queen being inspired by businesswoman and Barbadian singer Rihanna. Rihanna connects with the queen in their wealthy lifestyle, as the singer has established herself as one of the most successful women of her time. Furthermore, Anne of Cleves’ song distances the queen from the mistreatments of the king, focusing on her individuality, her independence and her power. This fact could be related to Rihanna’s songs after the physical assault she suffered at the hands of her boyfriend at the time, as “Rihanna

worked to distance herself from the language of victimization and image of helplessness that often accompanies the label "battered woman" (Fleetwood 2013, 420). When discussing this queen's costume, its red colour stands out as a symbol of her power. She also wears a crown symbolizing her divorce and chains to represent her faith.

The following queen was Katherine Howard and, as commented before, the authors wanted to focus on the abuse she suffered instead of painting her as the adulterous woman she has transpired to be in history. For this reason, Katherine's character is mainly inspired by Miley Cyrus and Britney Spears, stars that were sexualized and who suffered the consequences of predatory man behaviour. As the same Miley Cyrus suggests, she felt the pressure of being sexualized after leaving Disney (Rosa 2017). It is important to remember that Howard was much younger than the king he had little choice but to marry and that she has been drawn as his disloyal wife but Henry suffered no consequences after having many mistresses while married her. This highlights the double standard set between women and men and the scrutiny and abuse women are subjected to even today. This is why the song changes its tone at its ending from a carefree pop to emphasizing Katherine's abuse. Moreover, her costume in the musical helps the viewers understand how the male gaze helped define the historical vision of the queen, as it is the most revealing costume out of the six. Its colour, however, symbolizes her young age, as pink is often associated with young girls.

To conclude the comparisons between the queens and pop singers, Henry's surviving queen takes its inspiration from Alicia Keys' power. The song sets its premise on the impossibility of the queen to decide her future when Henry decided he wanted to marry her and starts as a letter to Catherine's previous beloved. However, it quickly turns into a song about women's empowerment in the style of Alicia Keys. To conclude with the study of this character, her costume also reflects the idea that has been portrayed of her. She has been stereotyped as the nurse, the one who took care of Henry in his last days, so her costume is blue as a symbol of that. Another fact that helps the show define itself as a feminist text that tries to alienate the story of these women from the male gaze and empower them is the absence of the figure of Henry VIII from the musical. Henry is, of course, mentioned but he is never seen on stage, thus empowering the stories of the queens.

‘We’re Six’

The fake competition the show sets its premise on is connected to Fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo movement. This is because Fourth-wave feminism focuses on the

empowerment of women and the #MeToo Movement helped unite a community of survivors who all shared their experiences with abuse (Collier Hillstrom 2019, 1). By acting and faking a competition, the queens give themselves the chance to narrate their stories and denounce the abuse they suffered at the hands of the king. In the first conversation the queens have after the first song, they seem to imply that they are not on friendly terms and they set the tone for the rest of the show, advancing that they are going to crown the one who suffered the most during their time married to king Henry VIII. However, this conversation also manages to set the record straight and clarify how the queens are going to reclaim their stories in the process. In addition, with the queens' commentaries, it becomes clear that history is based on patriarchal values which undermine women's stories and face them against each other.

Despite giving away the nature of the competition at the end of the musical, there are several instances where the queens show their unity and solidarity. On the first song, as commented before, the stereotypes are subverted by mentioning that the stories that have been told about these women may not be entirely truthful because of the patriarchal values of society: "too many years lost in history" (Marlow and Moss 2019). The song also makes reference to their unity and empowers these women as it separates their stories from the figure of the king. Moreover, after Katherine Howard's song, it is left to Catherine Parr to denounce the absurdity of the competition between them and to make the queens bond after they recount the similarities between their stories, as they all were subjected to the power of the king. Catherine Parr's song relates to the queens' story, but it also resonates with how none of the queens never really had a choice. So, by standing together in solidarity and narrating their stories of abuse, the queens are empowering their stories and also giving visibility to the #MeToo Movement while making a comparison to today's situation by connecting the queens to contemporary pop artists.

Conclusion

In summary, it is my contention that the musical *Six* is a feminist text which relates to fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement as the show re-tells and empowers the stories of Henry VIII's wives. By re-writing these women's stories, the creators bring attention to the fact that history is a patriarchal construction, as what we know of the queens' lives is mainly minimized to six words: divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived. If the stories of these women are minimized to their role in Henry's life, their accomplishments and the abuse they suffered get erased and sometimes justified by

stereotyping them as either good or bad wives. Moreover, it needs to be taken into consideration that the image that has prevailed of these women was in part created by a man who lost interest in them when they did not procure him a male heir. It is also interesting to discuss how the queens were blamed for not birthing a son, as the queens' main and virtually only role was to ensure the king's legacy. In consequence, the musical plays with these stereotypes and helps change the global perception of these queens, a perception that has been perpetuated in history books. Over and above that, another fact that helps the musical be considered a feminist text is how it connects the queens to important pop figures of the time. This helps the public connect with the queens easily as they can relate to them and conclude that their experiences are not so different from the experiences of famous people they can quickly recognise. Thus, the relation between these figures helps the authors convey their main concern when writing the musical, which was to explore the role of women in society. This directly relates to the musical's last song, in which the stories of these women are re-written as if they had lived on today's world. A feature that helps convey the feminine empowerment is the absence of the king as the main character, a fact that highlights the stories of the queens without having to be connected to that of the king. Thirdly, as a competition between these women is expected, the reveal of the unity and sorority of the queens at the end of the musical helps defend the values of Fourth-wave feminism and the #MeToo Movement. To conclude; the musical, by reclaiming the stories of the queens and exploring them away from the male gaze, gives the stories another dimension history has not been able to procure. Thus, the musical manages to distance the figures of the queens from that of the king and reclaim them as their own. To put it in Anne Boleyn's character in the musical words:

“Since the only thing we have in common is our husband, grouping us is an inherently comparative act and as such unnecessarily elevates a historical approach ingrained in patriarchal structures.” (Marlow and Moss 2017)

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