Introduction

This module will help students explore the importance of women—both British women and women from British colonies—to the British empire, as well as their importance in developing an understanding of Britain as an imperial power to a domestic audience at home. As a result, these materials provide some insight into the ways in which concepts of racial purity and proper gender roles bounded the social worlds of the British empire.

The British Empire
By the late 19th century, the British empire was the largest formal empire that the world had known. In addition to white settler colonies in Australia, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand, there were colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. In 1815, Britain had become the dominant power in the world following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, with its wealth and power built on the slave trade and the growing demand for sugar, tobacco, cotton, tea, and coffee. Apart from southern Africa, the move into sub-Saharan Africa did not really begin until after 1885, when the major western European nations agreed to divide Africa into spheres of influence.

Throughout the 19th century, the British claimed that the empire maintained the Pax Britannica—or peace of Britain. However, in what has been called Queen Victoria's Little Wars, the British Army was at war somewhere around the world every year during Queen Victoria's reign. The British empire was at its largest following World War I, when Britain was granted control of a number of German colonies in the Treaty of Versailles. Ironically, at that time the empire was beginning to implode because of the growth of nationalist movements in the colonies and the debt from the war. The process of decolonization accelerated after World War II, as the majority of colonies gained their independence and joined the British Commonwealth—essentially a trading organization. Although the process of decolonization is often portrayed in British textbooks as peaceful, in fact this was not the case, notably in India and Kenya.

Furthermore, during the 19th and 20th centuries an increasing number of people from the colonies began to travel to Britain, often for educational opportunities. Following World War II, the British government invited people from the Indian subcontinent, African colonies and the Caribbean to immigrate to Britain to help rebuild the country. This changed the demographics of modern day Britain, which is now a multi-cultural society.

Recently, scholars have argued that empire did not just occur overseas, but that empire also shaped domestic British history and British identity. From 1850, there was an explosion of images available to the British public about the empire. We live in such a visual world today it is hard to imagine what the impact of the sudden and very dramatic growth of print culture meant to the British, and how the images that began to flood the country in illustrated magazines shaped understandings of empire at home. Nonetheless, these images functioned to instruct their readers about the far away places and people who were connected to their lives through the reach of empire. With them came lessons about indigenous cultures, racial hierarchies and gender roles.

Women in the British Empire
While British women in the empire were always outnumbered by British men, from the beginning of empire women traveled to many sites of empire, where they established homes and found opportunities and a way of life not available to them in Britain. Beginning around 1850, the numbers of white women living in the empire increased, partly because the empire grew considerably in the later 19th century—the period historians call the Age of New Imperialism—and partly because of the rising concern in Britain over the relationships between British men and indigenous women. Encouraging white British women to travel to the colonies was seen by the British as a way to protect and maintain the social hierarchy of the colonial world, while preserving British racial purity.

In evaluating the role of British women in the empire, it is important to differentiate between colonies in Africa and India and white settler colonies where the situation of British women was substantially different. In Australia, where the number of British settlers rapidly outnumbered the indigenous population, men substantially outnumbered women, especially in the early stages of white settlement. Male convicts outnumbered female convicts 4 to 1, and the beginning of the colony in Australia was marked by the rape of women—both white and indigenous. In Australia, the numbers of women did not equal that of men until after World War II. As the colony developed, most settlers moved to isolated rural farms where women lived hard working lives. By contrast, in New Zealand, while men did outnumber women, it was a colony that encouraged settlement by families—a factor that shaped the lives of women. Interestingly, in 1893, New Zealand became the first country in the world to give women the vote.

In India, British women enjoyed a way of life that would not have been possible for most of them at home. This included the luxury of a large number of servants and the prestige and sense of racial superiority that came with being a colonial power. Until late in the 19th century, Africa was thought unsuitable for white women. The only exception to this was southern Africa, where the British government had encouraged settlement by families since the 1820s, as part of the effort to increase British dominance over the Boer population.

The relationship between British women and colonized women was complicated by a number of factors. For most British women, the empire provided a place of possibility where they could experience a range of opportunities denied them in Britain. At the same time, until well into the 20th century, white women were not allowed to work outside the domestic sphere in empire, except in very specific occupations usually closed to British men, such as the education of colonized women. In most cases, white women sought to maintain a social distance between themselves and colonized women. Yet they lived in close proximity to their female servants, and in many cases entrusted the care of their small children to them.

A number of British women did seek to alleviate the situation of colonized women through missionary work, education, and medicine. They called colonized women their "sisters," in a relationship that has been characterized by Antoinette Burton as "imperial

maternalism." Attitudes towards colonized women varied, depending on the site of empire. It was not uncommon for British women to view Indian women as needing sisterly protection from child marriage and the restrictions of purdah. On the other hand, attitudes toward African women were much less sympathetic, and they were frequently seen as primitive and highly sexualized.

Following the end of World War II, increasing numbers of women from former colonies moved to live in Britain, to work in a wide range of jobs, notably nursing. For many, Britain was seen as a place of economic possibility, although most of the jobs were low paying.

Views of the British Empire
Until recently, the British empire was represented in popular culture and scholarly literature as a masculine preserve. The empire was seen as a place where men pursued glory, found wealth, and discovered their masculinity.

In this view of empire, indigenous women and British women were usually seen as marginal, or, in the case of indigenous women, often absent altogether. Scholarship on British women in the empire has portrayed their presence in negative ways, stressing their shallow and secluded lives and their reluctance to establish any contact with non-Europeans, except servants—whom it was implied they treated in demeaning and demanding ways. Furthermore, it was argued that the presence of white women in the colonies damaged race relations and created a great social distance between colonizers and colonized. This was because white women needed to be protected by white men from what was purported to be the unbridled passion of colonized men, and because the arrival of white women in the colonies ended sexual relationships between British men and indigenous women. Obviously, this point of view ignores the exploitative nature of most of these relationships. While these relationships could include marriage, more commonly they did not, and the children were not recognized as British. Moreover, the family was often abandoned when the man returned home. This interpretation of the impact of British women on empire, which still lingers on in the scholarship and popular understanding of empire in Britain today, gave rise to the argument that women lost Britain the empire.

More recently, the studies on both British women and indigenous women have developed more nuanced interpretations of their role in empire. Some scholarship frames British women's contribution to empire around questions of their complicity or resistance in an effort to challenge the earlier negative stereotype. This approach portrays women either as villains deeply implicated in the running of empire or as heroines who challenged the hegemonic processes instituted by British men.

More convincingly, other scholarship demonstrates how British women in a male-dominated system could reinforce and at times challenge the power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. However, even those women who challenged specific aspects of empire, such as lack of educational opportunities for Indian women, did not question the framework of British empire.

Thus, regardless of whether the interactions were marked by condescending disregard for indigenous peoples or by a seemingly benign maternalism, the power hierarchies implied in the project of empire resulted in a system that privileged white womanhood and the cultural traditions of the British over those of the colonized. In the last 20 years, post-colonial feminism has demythologized the British empire by highlighting the insidious legacy for colonized women that, in many places, still exists today.