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## Editors' Introduction

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## Editors' Introduction

By Kimberly Chabot Davis, Priyanka Tripathi, and Catherine Ndinda

As co-executive editors of the *JWWS*, we are delighted to present our first regular issue of 2023 with a diverse array of articles, creative work, and reviews addressing women's issues and feminist praxis across many fields in the humanities, social sciences, education, business, and activism. The issue is truly international, with contributing authors from India, Nepal, Pakistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Greece, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, the United States, and the Philippines. Below, we identify several subthemes to help readers locate articles of interest.

### Muslim Feminist Writing and Culture

Relevant to the recent women's uprisings in Iran, several articles in our issue draw attention to Muslim feminism. Maha F. Habib's "Modern Articulations of Gender Parity: the 'New Woman' Debate in the British Victorian Era and the Modern Muslim World" puts into question the notion that feminism is a Western concept. She gives copious evidence from the feminist writings of Eastern Muslim women from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to late-20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on their efforts to reinterpret and highlight gender-neutral ideology in the Qur'an. Habib draws connections between Muslim feminism and British Enlightenment and Victorian debates about the New Woman and modernity, but she also offers specific attention to the cultural, historical, and religious contexts that distinguish modern Muslim feminism from its British counterparts.

Like Habib, Neelam Jabeen acknowledges the challenges for Muslim feminists in a region where feminism has been stigmatized as anti-Islam. Jabeen locates a subtle rather than overt form of resistance within Pakistani popular culture, in the Urdu television drama *The Heart Is Not Hopeless (Dil Naummeed to Nahi)*. The program depicts the intertwined nature of multiple forms of oppression that include child marriage, sex trafficking, domestic violence, prostitution, child labor, and child abuse, and locates the roots of all these oppressions in patriarchal systems. Jabeen claims that the program is the only drama in Pakistani television history that avoids the common strategy of capitulating to or "making a bargain with patriarchy."

Noureddine Bendouma and Salim Kerboua's "Islamic Feminism at the Crossroads between Apologetics and Defending Women" also examines the dialectic between Islam and feminism, and they offer the term "Islamic apologetics" to describe the phenomenon whereby Muslim women defend the very patriarchal structures that oppress them for fear of being accused of contamination by Western values. Asking the question "does Islamic feminism put defending women before defending Islam?", the authors examine four female characters in the Saudi Arabian novel *Girls of Riyadh*, a text that is banned in Saudi Arabia for its controversial content. Bendouma and Kerboua conclude that although some apologetic tendencies can be observed in its characters, *Girls of Riyadh* demonstrates that Islamic feminism is about choosing to defend women rather than prioritizing Islam.

### Violence against Women: Domestic Abuse and FGM

In the article by Nabeela Siddiqui et al. entitled, "Spousal Violence in Karnataka, India," the authors draw upon the National Family Health Survey (2019-20) to analyze the implications of spousal or gender-based violence on the mental and physical health of women victims. Despite a steep rise in cases of spousal violence in Karnataka during the COVID-19 pandemic,

the authors view the increasing reportage of such cases as a positive sign, reflecting a sense of awareness and rising confidence among Indian women. The article concludes that NFHS are a reliable data set that researchers, policymakers, and NGOs should use to better understand how to intervene to tackle domestic violence.

“Now, You Can Breathe,” a qualitative study done by Nayera Mohamed Shousha from Egypt, also sheds light on women’s experience of violence at the hands of their intimate partners. The author acknowledges that the pervasiveness of patriarchal dominance in Egypt has been a key obstacle in understanding how women navigate through such relationships. Women in narcissistic relationships go through different forms of violence and emotional abuse and often suffer in silence. The paper suggests that leaving and then re-orienting one’s self-concept is critical to survive the effects of narcissistic violence and abuse, a perspective encapsulated in the notion of breathing again.

In the paper “Am I More than a Housewife?” Maurine Ekun Nyok makes a compelling critique of Female Genital Cutting/Mutilation (FGC/FGM) as practiced in Cameroon. The author argues that although practitioners of FGM present it as a cultural practice that is beneficial to women who undergo the cut, a closer look at the arguments suggests that the practice only benefits men and keeps women oppressed. At its core, the cultural practice indoctrinates women to believe that their value is directly linked to the sacrifices they make for their husbands’ pleasure. As Nyok underscores, women’s lives in Cameroon are lived for the comfort of all others but themselves.

### **Feminist Solidarity, Activism, and Well-being**

While some articles in *Jiws* aim to uncover and understand instances of women’s oppression, many other articles are focused on positive change created by feminist communities and organizations. Focused on the Gikuyu in Kenya, Nyambura J. Njoroge’s essay, “Dignity, Life-Affirming Advocacy and Compassionate Solidarity,” views FGM as the starting point of women’s activism against violence and indignity visited upon them by their own families, communities, and governments. Resistance to FGM sparked a larger movement of resistance against violence and social injustice among Gikuyu women in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. That movement started by women has influenced contemporary women theologians like Njoroge to take up the mantle and tackle women’s oppression through local and global initiatives such as the Tamar Campaign. The collaboration of women theologians through the World Council of Churches is an inspiring model of transnational feminist solidarity.

While Njoroge’s “life-affirming advocacy” is informed by the African concept of *ubuntu* (justice and fairness based on communitarianism, solidarity, and human interdependence), Sharon Doetsch-Kidder and Kalia Harris focus on individual and collective “well-being” or “mindfulness” as crucial to sustaining the work of black and intersectional feminist activists in the United States. In their article, “Healing Justice as Intersectional Feminist Praxis,” they connect contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter and transformative justice with a history of work by womanists, U.S. third world feminists, intersectional feminists, and LGBTQIA people of color. Emphasizing the psychic toll of activism, they argue that self-care and community well-being are essential to political work. They conclude that activism “to achieve diversity, inclusion, and well-being are one and the same.”

Intersectionality is also crucial to the approach of Laila El Baradei and Passant Elwy, Egyptian scholars in the field of development whose article is entitled “Women Suffering from Multiple Sources of Oppression in Upper Egypt.” With a case study focused on a non-profit

development organization (ENID) that aims to help poor, illiterate, and unemployed women in rural communities in South Egypt, the authors argue that nonprofits can learn from ENID's efforts to recognize the intersectional causes of women's oppression and poverty. The authors view ENID's integrated development interventions as a success, since the women beneficiaries attested to life-changing experiences, enhanced self-confidence and skills, and overall empowerment as a result of ENID's programming.

### **Migrant and Displaced Women**

Several articles in our issue focus attention on women migrants and internally displaced women, in the past and present. Raka Banerjee's "Veiled Figures: Attached Settler Women in Andaman's Post-colonial Archive" discusses the invisible or "veiled" nature of women migrants during India's establishment of settlement villages in the Andaman Islands. Banerjee offers a critical reading of archival documents about the colonization scheme of 1949-52 and 1953-60 and the rehabilitation scheme of 1965-80. The essay critiques the patriarchal state's representation of the early settler women by highlighting that women's social and reproductive labor was in fact key to the settlement. Banerjee's gendered history of displacement reads the silences and empty spaces in the archive to uncover the administration's attitudes toward attached settler women and evidence of the women's own concerns.

With a focus on West Africa in the present day, the paper by Seun Bamidele and Innocent Pikirayi discusses the challenges and trauma of internally displaced women in Nigeria. The authors cogently articulate the invisibility of internally displaced women and the silence of their voices. The authors argue that although IDPs use their own initiative to devise strategies to survive and earn a livelihood in difficult circumstances, their attempts remain invisible to the authorities who design programs that neither recognize nor support the local initiatives of IDPs. The authors argue that the state needs to work collaboratively with the IDPs to design relevant and appropriate interventions. Bamidele and Pikirayi interrogate whether women are really heard when they do speak up.

Maria Tsouroufli draws on her own experience as a migrant woman academic—a white "other" (Greek) working in a post-Brexit United Kingdom—in her article, "Migrant Academic/Sister Outsider: Feminist Solidarity Unsettled and Intersectional Politics Interrogated." While the articles in the prior section stress the power of feminist sisterhood, Tsouroufli examines its failures, specifically in British higher education. Detailing her experiences of microaggressions and racist assertions of superiority from British feminist colleagues, she uses her position as a marginalized "sister outsider" to interrogate the contingency of whiteness in the context of Brexit and global hierarchies of North over South and West over East. Her analysis calls for a more inclusive feminist community that would not delegitimize and ostracize migrant women.

### **Women's Literature from India, Afghanistan, and Canada**

Literature written by women offers important testimony of women's oppression, resistance, and liberation. In their article, "Deconstructing 'The New Indian Woman,'" Somjeeta Pandey and Somdatta Bhattacharya focus on women sleuths who subvert gender roles in two detective novels: Kishwar Desai's *Witness the Night* (2010) and Kalpana Swaminathan's *I Never Knew It Was You* (2012). Analyzing women characters within a typically male-dominated arena and genre, the authors view the novels' female detectives—and their efforts to solve crimes

against women—as a reflection of the uninhibited, independent, professional, modern Indian woman resisting patriarchy.

Asma's article analyzes the much-discussed *bacha posh* cultural tradition in Afghanistan, using Ukmina Manoori's *I Am a Bacha Posh* and Zarghuna Kargar's *Bakhtawara's Story* as her central texts. The article offers a rebuttal of Western feminists and native critics who contend that *bacha posh* is a patriarchal tool for silencing Afghan women. In contrast, Asma emphasizes the freedom, power, and agency of this gender-crossing experience that equips women with a will to fight oppressive patriarchal culture.

The Canadian author Rupi Kaur's poetry collection *Milk and Honey* (2015) is the subject of an article by Renidia Audinia Siva, Ida Rosida, and Muhammad Azwar, who focus on the hegemonic structures that constrict female agency. The poems and their corresponding illustrations are examined through a feminist lens to explore themes of female sexual desire, menstruation, and bodily experience, and the authors conclude that Kaur's work is a powerful contemporary statement against patriarchy.

### **Women in the Workplace: Education, Banking, and Farming**

Like Maria Tsouroufli's article on British academia, several other articles in the issue focus on women's experiences in universities and secondary schools, and the importance of gender-focused training as a strategy for achieving equity in educational settings. Mamta Sitaula's article, "Paradoxes Faced by Women Teachers in Practicing Professional Ethics," employs a qualitative auto-ethnographic approach to interview five female teachers from different private colleges in Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. By comparing their experiences to various ethical paradigms of care, justice, critique, and voice, the findings revealed that gender discrimination still exists in the higher education systems at the undergraduate level in Nepal. The article advocates for a dire need for the raising of gender-consciousness among the management, stakeholders, and female teachers themselves to foster equity and a women-friendly environment. A similar conclusion is reached by Efiritha Chauraya's "Gender Politics and Zimbabwe Universities," which investigates the experiences of women deans in Zimbabwe universities. Despite being promoted to positions of influence and despite the institutional rhetoric of gender inclusion, the women deans in the study continued to experience gender-based discrimination that negatively affected their productivity and self-esteem. In order to make lasting change and turn the rhetoric into reality, Chauraya recommends gender-sensitization workshops and training to transform patriarchal attitudes on campus.

Focusing on education at the secondary school level, the article by Mollaw Abrha, Asrat Dagnaw Kelkay, and Amera Seifu examines the prevalence of gender-responsive pedagogy practices among science teachers in Ethiopia. Gathering data from teachers, school leadership, and students via interviews and focus group discussions, Kelkay found an increase among both women and men teachers in the use of gender-sensitive lesson plans and mentoring practices. To build upon this positive change, Kelkay calls for renewed emphasis on gender-responsive pedagogy in textbooks, curriculum, and training in order to encourage girls to overcome long standing barriers to their participation in science fields.

An article from Bahrain reflects the reality of the lack of gender parity in technical fields. Adel Ismail Al-Alawi, Noora Ahmed Al-Khaja, and Arpita Anshu Mehrotra explore attitudes about women's participation in the field of cybersecurity in the digital banking sector of Bahrain, which currently is a heavily male-dominated field. Surveying men and women banking professionals, the study showed positive perceptions of women's current and potential

contributions to cybersecurity in banking. Recommendations include government initiatives to encourage women to enter this career field, which would help to stimulate economic growth in Bahrain.

The article titled “Women and Literacy: Exploring the Literacy Experiences and Practices of Women Farmers in the Philippines” by Katrina Ninfa Topacio employs feminist standpoint theory, scholarship about literacy, and qualitative ethnographic research to explore the literacy experiences and practices of Filipino women rice farmers. Beyond narrow notions of reading and writing, literacy is viewed expansively by Topacio as the practice of cultural, pragmatic knowledge. The study showcases that Filipino women farmers’ literacy is directly associated with social and economic factors and a better livelihood as well. Nevertheless, the article exposes how long-established cultural and social practices and gender norms restrict women’s literacy, agency, and access to resources.

In addition to the scholarly articles and essays, our issue includes a poem, “The Crown of Loss” by Zahra Taheri. The poem explores the tragedy of the “Cinderella complex” among girls raised in patriarchal Eastern cultures who see marriage as the only possible fulfillment of their dreams. We are also pleased to include seven book reviews and three film reviews of the science fiction thriller *Yashoda* (India), the rape-revenge film *A Promising Young Woman* (US), and the refugee drama *Capernaum* (Lebanon). Given this wide selection of disciplines, experiences, methodologies, and national contexts, we hope that this issue of the *Journal of International Women’s Studies* will motivate and inspire feminist readers worldwide to continue their work to bring about a more just and inclusive world.