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Global Women's Precarity, Borderlands, Decoloniality, and Transformative Change

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This special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* gathers its articles from presentations delivered at the 2022 8th World Conference on Women's Studies, which focused on themes of women's precarity, borderlands, decoloniality, and transformative change. The global pandemic of COVID-19 left humanity to grapple with volatile socio-economic and socio-political realities across borders. The impacts of crises are never gender-neutral and COVID-19 is no exception, as often the most marginalized groups from the Global North and South continue to suffer the brunt of the consequences in an increasingly disaggregated world. On one hand, lockdowns and quarantines promoted developments in virtual digital worlds, encouraging the global exchange of ideas. On the other hand, this digital world is an exclusive one that does not include the voices of impoverished people—especially women—who remain marginalized, vulnerable, and invisible. Feminist interventions in knowledge discourses have revealed other important forms of exclusion faced by women in terms of an assumed objectivity, which neglects embedded biases in gender studies. The challenge in feminist interventions comes in two layers. First, it is the construction of the Other regarding gender subjectivity across the North and South. And second, it is in terms of cultural subjectivity as these two regions emerge from different histories, cultures, and indigenous forms of knowledge.

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities while reversing decades of significant achievements in women's rights. For instance, women make up 39% of global employment but account for 54% of overall job losses in the pandemic and post-pandemic context (Madgavkar et. al, 2020, para 1). Women were disproportionately impacted due to the increasing burden of unpaid care work as the economic sectors of service industries and other informal employment avenues were hardest hit. As of 2022, around 435

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million women and girls were living on less than \$1.90 a day, including 47 million being pushed into poverty as a result of COVID-19 (UN Women, 2022). Parallel to the economic impact, the pandemic stifled the rights of women and girls, with security-driven and emergency-centered pandemic responses shifting the focus away from fundamental rights and obligations. Reports of violence against women increased around the world as widespread stay-at-home orders forced women to shelter with their abusers. Increased domestic and intimate partner violence represents a “shadow pandemic” coinciding with reduced services to support survivors, partly due to operational challenges and decreased funding for law enforcement agencies and local women’s organizations (UN Women, 2021). Within this precarity in post-COVID times, a transformative vision is required to engage women across borders as equal constituents in collective leadership.

COVID-19 also highlights the tensions between the biopolitics of bodily borders and the geopolitics of terrestrial borders. The virus’s ability to transmit from host to host emphasizes the permeability of national walls, immigration checks, and quarantine camps. Anxieties regarding the Other as a contaminated unknown and as politically unknown increased dangers for migrants already living in precarious situations of discrimination, poverty, and violence. The treacherous paths of migration and the unstable realms of borders were only exacerbated for women and others with intersectional identities that are subject to further marginalization. As doctors and politicians all grappled with COVID-19 control measures—including herd immunity, mitigation, suppression, and/or elimination—border and cultural theorists considered various perspectives on borders. These borderland perspectives include fluid concepts of “borderescaping” and of borders as in motion, vacillating, mobile, and even bending (Brunet-Jailly, 2022). Crossing these thresholds into supposed realms of betterment often entails becoming a vulnerable and policed foreign body, especially for refugees and migrant women of color. What do these academic border concepts mean for women who are protecting themselves from the preexisting precarity motivating their migration and the impending precarity they will inevitably face in their new locations?

Recent developments in the literature on transnational feminism have been used as methodological tools to deconstruct the assumed objectivity and imagined social identities of women in knowledge discourses. This can be accomplished by retrieving moments of agency and autonomy by women in their respective localities. Transnational feminism is a theory and commitment to practice which recognizes differences and borders while building solidarity and transcending those borders. It critiques Western mainstream feminism for marginalizing women of color and calls for a decentering from hegemonic Western discourse. Anti-globalization and anti-capitalism are central components of this decentering, decolonizing project. Transnational feminism requires caution when speaking for others. Speaking—to be understood in a nexus of listening, responding, and interpreting—is only available to those who are heard in institutions of power. Academics and activists must engage in self-conscious discourse and activism that empowers the speaking of the oppressed, recognizes their specific dynamics and histories, and creates conditions for their voices to be heard.

Otherwise, one risks engaging in what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) refers to as “discursive colonization.” The universalized representations of Third World women as occupying an ahistorical and homogenous space—representations that arise in Western imperialist culture and are perpetuated by some feminist analysis—fail to account for the particular histories and situations of non-Western women. Recognizing the particular struggle of women located in their specific contexts helps demonstrate the importance of understanding the heterogeneous histories of all women. This perspective opposes monolithic representations of so-called Third World women as silenced and lacking agency, which is constructed by what Gayatri Spivak calls the “Masculine-imperialist ideological formation” that can insidiously influence the theories of metropolitan intellectuals. Transnational feminism problematizes

these constructions, offering a viable lens to critique Western hegemonic discourse and associated images while offering platforms for global women's voices and agency.

Due to the pandemic's exacerbation of the vulnerabilities of women's rights, especially in terms of precarity and migration issues, this special issue presents a global collection of impactful and varied research projects. The following short summaries introduce the journal articles—from global investigations of the feminization of migration to contemplations on the evolving portrayal of women in Bollywood films.

This *JWS* special issue opens with a team project investigating “Globalization and Migration: The Great Gender Equalizer?”. This comprehensive research questions narratives that automatically link globalization with increased economic opportunities for women in both the Global North and South. The authors contend that globalization perpetuates patriarchal labor discrimination, contributing to the feminization of migration. Thus, the researchers advocate for implementing gender-responsive, equitable, and effective labor migration policies for female migrants.

The article “Converging Crises and the Cost of Exclusion: Unveiling the ‘Invisible Women’ of Sri Lanka’s Economy” offers a timely and relevant perspective on Sri Lankan women's precarity in post-pandemic times. This research dissects the socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors that led to the invisibility of women in Sri Lanka's economy while understanding how such underlying causes might have been further aggravated by the pandemic and the country's subsequent economic recession. It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing women in Sri Lanka's formal economy while bringing about a transformative vision to address existing gaps and challenges. The paper reaches a conclusion that when women lead, participate, and benefit equally in all aspects of life, then societies and economies will thrive, which will allow all citizens to contribute to sustainable development and inclusive economic growth.

The article “Who is to Blame?: African Feminism, Human Rights, and Sexual Violence Against *Izintombi* (Virgins) in South Africa” analyzes research conducted in the KwaZulu-Natal Province regarding *ubuntombi* (virginity) as a cultural heritage and critical identity marker of young womanhood within the Zulu cultural context. Although this study asserts that sexual violence challenges the existence and survival of this practice, some human rights and feminist activists assert that communities that preserve *ubuntombi* actually promote rape against young women. Regardless of *ubuntombi* practices, this article questions why gender violence is escalating throughout many communities in South Africa and how it can be addressed without blaming the sufferers. Ultimately, the article highlights the need for intensified activism by African feminists and human rights activists against the pervasiveness of sexual violence against these young women and women in general in South Africa.

The film studies paper “Masculinist Constructions of Nationalism in India: Gender, Body Politics, and Hindi Cinema” presents a literature review to discuss how India's nationalist discourses are embedded in hegemonic masculinity. Then, the article explores women protagonists in Hindi cinema and their use in building imagined landscapes of nationalism, as defined by borders and boundaries constructed through sexual norms and gendered moralities overlaid on the terrain of women's bodies. The paper argues that there are three dimensions to women's body politics in Hindi cinema, which have broadly shaped people's imaginings of India as a nation. These three dimensions focus on the body as a site of symbolism, sexuality, and reproduction. The paper also investigates moments of rupture that dismantle these hegemonic boundaries, transforming female bodies from sites of coercion and hegemonic nationalism to sites of transformational agency, resistance, and freedom in popular culture.

The powerful article “Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation through Livestreaming in Indonesia: Unequal Power Relations at the Root of Child Victimization” applies a criminology lens to investigate five cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse via livestreaming. Then,

the researchers use Foucauldian power relations theory to analyze the victimization and revictimization of children through social structures, which include perceptions of children, victim blaming, gender inequality, and the pornography industry. To combat these entrenched systems, the researchers call for a reassessment of legal terminologies used to define child sexual abuse and exploitation through livestreaming and the development of appropriate laws to deter the viewers of these victims.

The comprehensive project “Women Caregivers of Palliative Care Patients: The Arogyakeralam Project in Kerala, India” studies how women palliative caregivers perceive the functioning of the Arogyakeralam initiative and the specific challenges they experience as women caregivers. Using a multi-stage random sampling methodology, the project interviewed fifty-four female primary palliative caregivers who reported that they felt satisfied with their healthcare training to perform their nursing duties. However, the women reported various physical, psychological, and social problems, leading the researchers to encourage adjustments to the initiative in order to accommodate these women caregivers’ general needs and their gender-specific ones as well.

The timely article “Beautiful, Sexy, and Happy Celebrities: Perfect Mothers or Instamoms” contemplates the digital transformation of global consumerism that adheres to patriarchal capitalist values through social media’s emphasis on vanity and pleasure. The research analyzes the commodification and presentation of “perfect motherhood” by performing a close digital ethnographic reading of thirty Instagram accounts posted by various Turkish influencers who are dubbed “Instamoms.” The researcher combines these assessments with a series of semi-structured interviews with six Instamoms and twelve followers to investigate the intersections of perceptions of knowledge and beauty with celebrification and branding and how all these factors impact and promote the commercialization of childhood.

The literary analysis article “Changing Ideologies of Marriage in Contemporary Indian Women’s Novels” applies a feminist lens to analyze Shashi Deshpande’s *A Matter of Time* (1996) and Shobhaa De’s *Second Thoughts* (1996) and these authors’ commentaries on modern Hindu marriage. The writer contends that these novelists depict Hindi wives’ precarity, subjugation, limitations, suffering, conflicts, and resistance. The thesis asserts that these heterosexual sacred unions in fact mirror the unequal relationship between master and servant, which promotes a sense of alienation in Indian women that causes some to revolt against and reject the institution of marriage.

The in-depth study “Impact of Rural Finance Institution Building Programme (RUFIN) on the Productivity of Women-Owned Farm and Non-Farm Enterprises in Northern Nigeria” uses a multi-stage sampling procedure to gather primary data on these issues from questionnaires administered to 390 beneficiaries and to an equal number of non-beneficiaries. The researchers applied the Total Factor Productivity (TFP) and propensity score matching to assess the overall productivity of women-owned enterprises in Northern Nigeria. Ultimately, the study finds that RUFIN creates a positive impact on the productivity of beneficiaries, leading the researcher to advocate the promotion of RUFIN programs across national and regional government districts in Nigeria to scale productivity and increase the benefits of women-owned rural initiatives.

Using Judith Butler’s theory of precarity, the literary analysis “Women and the Precarity of War: Reading Women Militants and Activists in Sharmila Sayyed’s *Ummath*” explores this novel’s presentation of three female characters’ lives in war-torn Sri Lanka. The author finds that *Ummath* powerfully critiques the sociopolitical conditions that aggravated the nation’s internecine separatist conflict, leading to the stigmatizing of women who became part of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the failure of rehabilitating the militants into the community. The paper author concludes that this novel’s microcosmic presentation of Sri Lankan women’s postwar experiences demonstrates the need to understand how the

instability of social uprisings specifically impacts women and how to protect their vulnerabilities within the context of human rights.

The film studies article “Bollywood as a Site of Resistance: Women and Agency in Indian Pop Culture” contemplates how Indian cinema defines and redefines a gendered subjectivity. First, the author explores 1970s Bollywood films to understand traditional gender role portrayals, especially with the use of the “male liberator” character. Then, the author explores the modern women-focused movies *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga* (2019), *Thappad* (2020), and *Paglait* (2021) to demonstrate how current gender equity movements, such as #MeToo, have promoted paradigm shifts in Bollywood female characters’ depictions, resistance, and empowerment.

In conclusion, transformative change is often intimidating and hard to achieve because it necessitates eradicating all dimensions of comfort. When one’s comfortable surroundings are threatened by those who hope to bring about change, the common reaction is fear of the unknown and, hence, resistance. Thus, communities must examine the power of transformation in terms of attitudes, hearts, perspectives, behaviors, and verbal expressions. Barren theorizing often leads to a lack of commitment to change and the status quo is maintained. If the world of academia enriches bookshelves and computer software with mere theory divorced from praxis, it becomes irrelevant in bringing about crucial transformative change. Advocacy and activism in academic writing, such as feminist writings, should be a matter of transformation that intentionally goes beyond knowledge production into deeper praxis. This enables transformative change regarding personal, social, and world transformation in proactively addressing repression against women’s rights.

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