Editors' Introduction

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Editors’ Introduction

By Priyanka Tripathi, Kimberly Davis, and Catherine Ndinda

Gender is key to understanding any human society. With a focus on how gendered power and privilege operate in different socio-cultural settings, this issue of the Journal of International Women’s Studies explores the possibilities of reconstructing gender dynamics and working towards equity, equality, and gender justice. Each article presents a unique investigation of various aspects of gendered experiences, providing insight into the numerous obstacles and triumphs encountered by women across the world. Comprising twenty-nine articles, divided into sections on articles, film reviews, and book reviews, this issue focuses on different articulations of gendered experience across many regions of the world.

Research Articles and Creative Writing

Pakistan

The persistence of patriarchal norms in Pakistani literature and music is examined in Amna Khan’s “Triumphant or Trapped Pakistani Women? A Feminist Critique of Mueenuddin’s ‘Nawabdin Electrician’ and Haq’s song ‘Chamkeeli.’” Despite societal changes, male writers continue to perpetuate stigmatizing portrayals of women. According to the study, current portrayals of women, despite evolving from submissive to hypersexual, do not contribute to women’s autonomy but rather perpetuate patriarchal systems. The article prompts a call for dismantling these stereotypes as a more effective means of advancing women’s rights.

Zubaria Andlib and Sameen Zafar’s “Women and Vulnerable Employment in the Developing World: Evidence from Pakistan” focuses on the scarcity of research on vulnerable employment among women in low-to-middle income countries, with a special focus on Pakistan. Using data from the 2014-15 and 2018-19 Pakistan Labor Force Surveys, the study employs statistical analysis to identify factors contributing to women’s engagement in vulnerable employment, emphasizing the prevalence of girls aged 10 to 14 in unpaid family work.

In their article titled “A Contextual Analysis of the Feminization of Poverty in Urban Slums of Pakistan,” Humaira Zulfiqar and Ra’ana Malik explore the concept of “feminization of poverty,” originally coined by Diana Pearce in 1978, with a focus on how intra-household gender disparities, influenced by patriarchal structures, contribute to women’s poverty. Using in-depth interviews, the research also assesses the impact on men living in poverty. It evaluates the effectiveness of social welfare programs like the Benazir Income Support Program.

India

Focusing on the Indian context, Ananya Dutta Gupta’s “We Deliver: The Condition of the Woman Academic in India Today” is an auto-ethnographic essay examining women’s condition in humanities academia, drawing upon theories from Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Knowledge. While embracing the 2020 National Education Policy’s progressive intentions, the author advocates for a more nuanced evaluation of the realities encountered by female educators and researchers in the competitive higher education scene. The essay contrasts the idealized portrayal of an empowered Indian woman teacher in the NEP with the challenges faced by women
in academia, questioning whether the spirit of decolonization in education truly empowers women and recognizes the diversity of women’s experiences and contributions in academia.

Another article focused on women in the workplace, Anil Jose Thomas and N. T. Sudhesh’s essay explores the profound impact of motherhood on a woman’s personal and professional life. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, they reveal the emotional upheaval and career re-evaluation experienced by women returning to work after maternity leave. The essay thus underscores the need for mentorship and supportive work environments to aid women in balancing their roles as mothers and professionals.

The alarming prevalence of sexual harassment in India, especially “Eve-teasing” in public spaces, is explored in detail in Usha Rana’s article. Rana sheds light on how Eve-teasing causes severe repercussions for women, including adverse impacts on their careers, socio-economic prospects, and political engagement. Focusing on young women cadets aged 19 to 24 in the National Cadet Corps (NCC), the research employs a structural feminist approach to dissect the patriarchal socialization contributing to Eve-teasing. Despite uncovering high levels of harassment, the study highlights the empowering role of organizations like NCC in instilling self-confidence and resilience in young women, underscoring the need for similar agencies’ involvement in early empowerment efforts.

In “A Gendered Historical Discourse of the Naxalbari Movement,” Pritha Sarkar analyzes Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel The Lowland (2012), focusing on its portrayal of the Naxalbari movement’s gendered history. It seeks to locate the position of middle-class women within this significant socio-political event in India’s history. The study engages with conflicting narratives surrounding women’s roles in the movement, highlighting their potential for emancipation and their underlying androcentric nature. By examining this dynamic, the paper aims to reveal women as subversive agents challenging gender hierarchies within the Naxalbari movement.

The Middle East

Mahshid Zamani, Parisa Sadat Seyed Mousavi, and Ali Reza-Pezhman’s article titled “The Role of Pregnant Women’s Attachment Relationships in Predicting Maternal Adjustment during Pregnancy” examines the significance of maternal adjustment, defined as a woman’s response to challenges from conception to childbirth. Through convenient sampling, the study comprises 317 Iranian pregnant women in their six-to-nine-month gestation period as its participants. It specifically investigates the role of pregnant women’s attachment relationships, finding that higher levels of anxiety and avoidance in these attachments are significant indicators of lower maternal adjustment, highlighting the potential impact on maternal well-being and fetal development.

Ayelet Makaros and Edith Blit-Cohen’s study explores the experiences and coping strategies of activist women in religious Israeli society based on in-depth interviews with fourteen participants. Being a religious woman activist is made difficult because Ultra-orthodox and Orthodox Jewish women are expected to conform to conservative religious norms where men are the leaders. Surprisingly, the findings reveal that contrary to the anticipated influence of maternal figures on women activists, it was fathers who played the most pivotal role in these women’s upbringing and development as activists. As a result, the study suggests the importance of men’s active involvement in promoting and empowering religious women in Israel to ascend to leadership roles in religious institutions and the broader society.

Luma Balaa, in her article “The Madness of Women as an Illusional Power in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Fadia Faqir’s Pillars of Salt,” offers a critical and historical examination of the literary representation of mad women in English and Jordanian literature. Anchored in Marta
Caminero-Santangelo’s feminist criticism, the article rejects the idea of madness as liberation and argues that madness becomes a tool of oppression utilized by patriarchal and colonial forces to silence and sideline women into spaces of otherness.

Hamza Qasem and Manal al-Natour, in their short story “Shall Her Eyes Rest: A Story of a Syrian Refugee,” delve into the multifarious struggles of refugees by narrating the journey of Syrian refugee Maryama in the USA. Employing storytelling to share the experiences they uncovered during interviews with Syrian refugees, Qasem and al-Natour reflect the trauma and resilience of refugees trying to fit into a foreign community.

West Africa

“A Listening Guide Analysis of Bisi’s Story of Living with Female Genital Mutilation,” by Chinyere Elsie Ajayi and Sunday Ajayi, provides an in-depth exploration of one woman’s experience with Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and how the practice has been used as a means to control women’s sexuality. The authors note that despite global and local interventions to tackle the sexist practice of FGM, the practice persists in Nigeria. Employing the “Listening Guide” method as an analytical framework, the authors explore the disempowering effect of FGM on Bisi’s intimate relationships and physical and mental well-being. The article underscores the need for further research into the effects of FGM in perpetuating unequal power dynamics within intimate relationships, and it calls for interventions to discourage support for FGM among Nigerian women.

Another noteworthy article, “Women Supporting Women: A Glass Ceiling for Women Politicians in Ibadan, Nigeria,” by Chisaa Onyekachi Igbolekwu et al., delves into the efforts and difficulties of women politicians in Nigeria to shatter the glass ceiling in politics. This paper highlights the complexity of elective politics in Nigeria where women’s representation remains low, as is common in many nations in Africa. Some reasons cited for the low representation of women in elective politics include fear of political violence and stereotypes about female politicians as being risk-averse. The findings also illustrate a paradox—that although women support fellow women during the campaign process, that support does not always lead them to vote for women politicians. This study explores the importance of women voting for women politicians as key to future progress towards gender parity in Nigerian politics.

The article titled “A Review of the Cultural Gender Norms Contributing to Gender Inequality in Ghana: An Ecological Systems Perspective” by Portia Narrey, Ozge Sensoy Bahar, and Proscovia Nabunya reveals that despite notable global advancements in improving the well-being of women and girls, a significant gender gap remains evident in Ghana. This gap persists due to cultural norms that favor men and assign women subservient roles, perpetuating gender disparities across various societal levels. To gain a comprehensive understanding of how these cultural norms impact women’s lives, the authors apply Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems multilevel approach. The research involves a comprehensive review of scholarship from social science and development journals, legal documents, and international reports. The authors argue that cultural gender norms maintain the status quo of gender inequality, and they identify other factors—such as religion and social systems that support patriarchal privilege—as contributing to women’s oppression and exclusion from power.

East Asia

Caroline C. Yih’s article delves into the issue of institutional sexism impeding women’s career advancement within the ecclesiastical system in Hong Kong’s English-language Christian
churches. Yih tackles a topic that few religious women dare to address because of the widespread notion that it is sinful to challenge church leadership. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study uncovers pervasive gender discrimination, encompassing various forms of marginalizing treatment that ultimately diminish the authority and voices of clergymen. It aims to contribute to the global feminist dialogue by shedding light on the patriarchal dynamics within Hong Kong churches and advocating for measures to address the adverse effects on women in leadership roles. The significance of this article and its effort to break the silence about institutional sexism goes beyond Hong Kong and is relevant to other countries where churches foster patriarchal societal structures.

United States and Europe
Focused on a pioneering 19th century American writer, Elif S. Armbruster’s “The Racial Swamps of Reconstruction: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Life in Post-Civil War Florida” analyzes racist depictions of African Americans within Stowe’s memoir *Palmetto Leaves* (1873). The memoir depicting her life in Florida after the U.S Civil War reveals the intersection of race and gender with slavery and war. Armbruster’s work contributes to an understanding of how White, Western, feminist women may serve the interests of hegemonic power in promulgating racism and classism.

Hanna Varjakoski’s article titled “Older Women as Active Online Agents: Diversifying Cultural Conceptions of ‘Grannies’ through Social Media” examines the impact of social media on older women’s agency and cultural representation. Focusing on Finnish women bloggers over the age of 60 who identify as “grannies,” Varjakoski demonstrates that social media provides a platform for showcasing the lives and contributions of older women, challenging ageist stereotypes, and promoting positive perspectives on aging. Blogging enables these women to engage in current societal discussions and exert political influence.

Film Reviews
Our issue includes reviews of three Indian films and one Pakistani film that collectively explore gendered experiences across South Asia. The characters challenge stereotypes, resist oppressive dictums, and navigate the complexities of a world that marginalizes them. Chandrakanth Kamble’s review of the Tamil (Indian language) film *Natchathiram Nagargirathu* (*The Star is Moving*, 2022) explores how the director challenges the representational politics that constantly marginalizes and stereotypes female Dalit subjectivity on screen. Avishek Deb, in the review of *Thappad* (*The Slap*, 2020), delves into the necessity to inspire women to openly defy the socio-cultural shackles that restrain them in domestic and public spaces. Meenakshi Jha and Katyayani, in their review of *Tribhanga: Tedhi Medhi Crazy* (2021), probe into how the film deconstructs idealized notions of motherhood and womanhood, opening up spaces for women to embrace the choices they have in their lives. Finally, reviewed by Salma Javed, the Pakistani film *Joyland* (2022) explores the tribulations faced by transgender individuals in Pakistan and how they are forced to conform to the hetero-normative dictums that suppress and extinguish their desires and identity.

Book Reviews
The concluding segment of this issue pertains to book reviews encompassing a wide spectrum of subject matter related to feminism, sexual identity, and gender equality. The themes elucidated underscore the significance of acknowledging the divergent experiences of feminism
among women and sexual minorities from distinct racial and socioeconomic strata. This critical evaluation challenges the prevailing perception of a monolithic and static feminist movement, instead advocating for a more intricate and comprehensive approach to feminism that considers the distinctive obstacles encountered by various women’s groups. Book reviews, including those of *Women in Financial Services: Exploring Progress Towards Gender Equality* (2022), *Daddy Issues: Love and Hate in the Time of Patriarchy* (2022), *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women’s Prisons* (2016), and *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (2021), highlight women’s risk-averse tendencies in operational and investment contexts, which lead to their overrepresentation in corporate governance and smaller financial institutions. They explore the impact of patriarchal systems on relationships, feminism, and gender dynamics, discussing topics like the #MeToo movement, generational divisions in feminism, and evolving gender relations. Other book reviews like *The Transnational Redress Movement for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery* (2020), *Race and Reproduction in Cuba* (2022), *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery, and Resistance* (2020), and *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History* (2022) all delve into the historical confluence of sexuality and morality, shedding light on those who have historically exploited these intersections. They explore the evolution of the transnational redress movement, focusing on the actions of organizations in South Korea, Japan, and the United States. Additionally, they analyze the complex journey to LGBTQ+ social liberation, particularly the influence wielded by the most privileged within the community.