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Introduction: Selected Papers from the 9th World Conference on Women’s Studies, Bangkok, Thailand, 2023

By Alicia Haynes,1 Asma Noureen,2 and Marlene Johnson3

This special issue of the Journal of International Women’s Studies is a compilation of articles drawn from presentations delivered at the 9th World Conference on Women’s Studies (WCWS), in Bangkok, Thailand, 2023. Focusing on the theme “Gender Justice and the Power of Feminisms: Dismantling Patriarchy, Building Equity,” the conference papers explored a range of topics such as migration, intersectionality, public spaces, spirituality, and decoloniality. The purpose of the WCWS conference is to provide participants the opportunity to expand their knowledge on global feminisms and the interlocking fields of gender and women’s studies, development, sexuality, media, and cultural studies, as they each offer insight into achieving an equitable world. Scholars expanded their professional networks and gained necessary feedback on presentations to support research rigor and provide opportunities to publish their work.

Given that the long-lasting imprint of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the ways communities assemble, the conference occurred in a hybrid format, giving wider accessibility to intellectual and academic spaces for emerging and established scholars worldwide. Virtual and physical meeting rooms fostered a space of learning and conversation that examined the liberatory and radical possibilities of global feminisms. In so doing, the conference positioned a framework for scholars to grapple with the plague of issues affecting women globally due to various crises. Women bear the brunt of the impacts of crisis due to disproportionate dimensions of power. We frame this special issue with the work of Sylvia Wynter, who contests the constructs of knowledge in the “overrepresentation of man” (Wynter 267) and argues for the importance of disrupting binary notions of knowledge and experience. The conference and subsequent special issue demonstrate a pivot in thought that addresses women’s experiences of oppression by prioritizing women’s narratives, how they envision themselves, and the strategies they employ to contest entrenched oppression. Articles in the issue further consider women’s intersectional positionalities, considering gender among other identity constructions that account for communal experiences without disregarding difference. The foregrounding of gender justice and the power of feminisms allow for unpacking the volatile challenges that permeate socio-economic and socio-political systems transnationally. Concomitantly, the

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2 Asma Noureen holds an MA in Critical Gender Studies from Central European University, Vienna, Austria. Her research interests include queer migration, education and empowerment, mental health, livability, and belonging. Besides her research interests, Asma is passionate about coaching young individuals in their academic and professional growth. Asma currently works with the Office of Global Education at NYU Abu Dhabi as an academic and study-abroad advisor.

3 As a dedicated Gender Equality Advocate, Marlene Johnson has worked with various multinational developmental institutions and has an interest in the intersection of rural agricultural development and women. She has designed and implemented training in Business Management and Gender Analysis and co-authored Gender Socialization for Early Childhood Education Practitioners. Ms. Johnson is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, Barbados.
power of feminisms enables heightened inclusivity that responds to rising threats of nationalism, tensions over land and space, militancy and displacement, and ideological narratives that persist in maintaining structural inequalities.

With a focus on alleviating oppression, the articles in this issue draw upon critical research perspectives that address women’s expansive and liberatory experiences and that illustrate cross-border collaboration, transnational feminist theorizing, and critical feminist praxis in fostering transformation. Moreover, this edited volume is unique for several reasons. The breadth of contributions centers on people of color from the Global South, in this case, India, Africa, and the Caribbean. The special issue’s editorial team is comprised of two Caribbean scholars and one Pakistani counterpart, making a diverse team. Additionally, the reviewers of the manuscripts also reflect young scholars and established academics from similar geographical locations. As such, this issue of the *JIWS* provides a platform for a wide range of feminist thinkers and practitioners to coalesce as they highlight the interplay of discourse on women’s varied experiences from the Global South. Featured articles offer a variety of genres and contributions from scholars that are indicative of the overarching reach of the *JIWS* and the inclusive community it forges across borders. The diversity of geographies underscores an interplay of complexity, possibilities, and contradictions rooted in women’s precarious socio-cultural, economic, and political positions. While some articles offer emotive reflections on women’s spiritual and community practices, others engage with the cultural symbolism within feminist literature, women’s precarity within specific geopolitical locations, inequitable working conditions, and the need to foreground women’s experiences.

Furthermore, a few pieces reminisce on journeys of self-discovery and healing, as other pieces grapple with the current impact of digital trends on women’s lives and women’s patterns of engagement. Most articles demonstrate a positioning of women that makes their practices and experiences visible and relevant. Transformative change underlines many of the submissions as a necessary praxis in advancing women’s rights and well-being. The special issue contains enriching contributions of a broad scope that dismantles conventional ways of knowing. It centralizes the themes of gender and education, sexual abuse in interpersonal relationships, Dalit feminist literature, the precarity of migrants crossing borders, women’s digital lives online and in STEM careers, women in the labor force, healing communal spaces, and women’s care labor within the economy. These pieces do not merely explicate women’s vulnerable plight across borders but probe, analyze and imagine women’s resilience, practices, and life force. Pertinent insights are raised that have value in informing policy, influencing patterns of behavior, and offering actionable measures to improve women’s conditions.

In the article “The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Interpersonal Relationships: A Cross-Sectional Study in Trinidad,” Bernadette Marson explores the correlation between child sexual abuse and interpersonal relationships, mainly focusing on women’s experiences in Trinidad. This case study validates that women who experienced sexual abuse within their families reported heightened interpersonal difficulties in adult life compared to non-abused women and exposes some particularities in the relationship between the victims and perpetrators.

“Dalit Feminist Literature from South India: New Models and Perspectives” by Sujatha Moni and Miruna George presents the significant contributions of South Indian Dalit women’s literature to feminism in the 21st century through an analysis of poetry, short stories, and autobiographical writings of six Dalit women writers. Utilizing Dalit feminist theory and standpoint theory, the analysis highlights the complex realities of intersectional oppressions faced by Dalit women and emphasizes their resilience and resistance against patriarchal caste oppression, specifically through their responses to sexual violence and defiance of traditional gender norms.
In their article, “Forced Migration as a ‘State of Exception’: Precarious Lives of Migrant Women of Jammu and Kashmir in Kulvir Gupta’s Embers the Beginning and Embers the End of Mirpur,” Rishav Bali and Isha Malhorta uncover the forgotten stories of migrant Kashmiri women who made the journey from the Pakistani side of Kashmir to the Indian side of Kashmir in 1947. Through a critical analysis of Kulvir Gupta’s memoir, the article discusses the harrowing experiences endured by these women during migration and in the migrant camps, employing Judith Butler’s concept of precarity and Agamben’s notions of the “camp” and “state of exception.” The study reveals how these women were subjected to marked gender-based violence and exploitation within the contemporary political landscape of the region, shedding light on their overlooked struggles and resilience.

“Re-envisioning Community-Engaged Healing for Black Women,” by Reanae McNeal, Marqua Harris, and Vanessa Oliphant, addresses the urgent need to address health disparities faced by Black women in the United States, advocating for the creation of sacred spaces for their healing. Drawing from interdisciplinary fields such as Public Health, Black Psychology, Africana Studies, and Gender, Women’s, and Sexuality studies, the authors emphasize the importance of gender and racial justice in promoting health equity. Through a lens of collective healing and resistance against anti-Black gendered racism, the paper highlights the historical and contemporary challenges faced by Black women while advocating for a holistic approach of embodied and community-engaged healing grounded in African-centered worldviews, socially engaged spirituality, and gendered wisdom systems across generations.

“Moralistic Science: Socio-Cultural Norms about Sexuality in Indian Biology Education,” written by Panchami Jose, Sugra Chunawala, and Deepa Chari, challenges the notion that science and morality are separate in biology education, highlighting their intertwined influence on the regulation of human sexualities. Through an analysis of a school science textbook and interviews with teachers in Kerala, India, the study reveals how scientific discourse, particularly regarding safer sex, often perpetuates a romanticized, monogamous heterosexual ideal. It also explores how teachers, influenced by socio-cultural norms, incorporate moral ideals into scientific discussions, illustrating the complex interplay between scientific knowledge and cultural values in shaping sexual subjectivities.

“Epistemic Injustice against Khoi-Coloured Women from the Cape: Connected Encounters with the Matriarchal Lineages of Krotoa” is an auto-ethnographic essay by Darlene Miller on Coloured (biracial/mixed-race) women descendants of the invisibilized, Indigenous Khoi of South Africa. Miller uses “ritual archives” and “insider methodologies” to address the lacunae in the (her)story of these Native peoples and simultaneously engages in her own journey of self-discovery. The epistemology, as a decolonial challenge to conventional research methods, involves memory and spiritual/bodily experiences and rituals to reconstruct and celebrate the legacy of Krotoa, a Khoi woman translator who was instrumental in negotiations between the Dutch colonists and viceroy in the 17th century.

“‘Everyone Here Is Smarter than Me’: Imposter Phenomenon among Women Returning to Technology Careers after a Career Break,” written by Swati Singh and Sita Vanka, presents an analysis of the imposter phenomenon among professional women re-entering technology fields in India after a career break. It challenges the focus on the psychological characteristics of the individual by considering the role of context within the industry, namely dynamism, mandatory teamwork, situations that demand initiative-taking, information sharing and the need to ask for help.

Alicia Haynes’s article, “Hashtag Counterpublics: #Lifeinleggings as Feminist Disruption to Mainstream Public Discourses,” evaluates the significance of women’s online practices and their negotiation of online and offline public spheres. The study articulates women’s shaping of public discourse through a tactical manipulation of digital conventions.
such as the hashtag that reveal a representative identity politics in confronting street harassment and sexism. Women’s operationalization of the hashtag demonstrates the extent to which they produce their own media from counterspaces, increase visibility through storytelling, and infiltrate mainstream public discourse as evident in newspaper publications. Acts of engaging in counterpublics and speaking to their experiences underline their forging of communities, deployment of effective digital practices, and taking up space despite sexism. Their online practices offer a view of the radical possibilities that ensue from women’s engagement on social media platforms and the overlap of counterspaces with other publics.

Using the World Bank’s Women Business and the Law Index as a proxy for economic empowerment of women, “Assessment of the Economic Empowerment of Women before and after the Establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)” assesses the impact of commitments and legislation introduced after the establishment of the 15 member countries of the union of West African states. The study, authored by Agatha Itohan Oseghale and associates, concludes that most states have made progress in promoting gender equality but fall short in empowering women post-childbirth who want to return to work and in closing the wage gap, evidencing that legislating acceptance of equality is less difficult than enforcing egalitarian practices.

“Professional Black South African Women Speak Out in Resistance to Patriarchy: Overcoming Barriers to Self Development,” by Padhma Moodley and Corné Meintjes, is phenomenological research using semi-structured interviews to explore the intra-cultural patriarchal oppressions faced by three professional Black South African women and their resistance to these norms as they establish their identities and claim the achievement of self-development aspirations. Women are faced with a false dichotomy between gender equality and traditional governance structures since women’s participation in leadership and decision-making is regarded as a Western construct. The “Strong Black Woman” image as a badge of honor, however, is not sufficiently challenged for the self-harm the efforts to achieve extreme independence can cause.

Kirandeep Kaur’s “Rights of Women Laborers in the Indian Legal System: A Critical Analysis” is marked by a feminist analysis of various labor legislation affecting women laborers in India through document review and critical analysis of over 40 labor laws in four concise Labour Law Codes passed by the Parliament. The status quo is that many state legislatures have not drafted the rules under the codes, preventing implementation. The study evidences that legislating protection of the rights of women workers is less difficult than getting practices adopted de facto.

“Trends in Family Planning Methods: An Intergenerational Study of the Lived Experiences of Tribal Women in Attappady, India,” by Asha Sankar V. and Moly Kuruvilla, is an intergenerational comparison based on dyadic interviews with 90 Attappady tribal women in southern India to determine their awareness of, access to, and use of family planning services. The research found that there is a higher acceptance of sterilization among older women and increasing awareness and assertiveness in demanding their rights among the younger generation of mothers. These younger mothers, nevertheless, have been denied access to sterilization due to factors determined by healthcare workers. Temporary modern methods are less utilized by women due to fear, stigma, and misconceptions. Natural methods like abstinence to avoid unplanned or unwanted pregnancies are increasing in use, but male sterilization is unfortunately waning in popularity, despite its lesser risks. They argue that family planning largely remains a woman’s burden in these tribal communities.

Neda Parvin Shaikh’s article “Feminism in Practice: Learning from the Barefoot ‘Solar Mamas’” critically assesses the Solar Electrification Programme of the Barefoot College (NGO), situated in India. The research is grounded methodologically in feminist praxis and borrows from the Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) and Women and the Politics of Place
conceptual frameworks. It contends that Barefoot College’s non-normative vocational training through sign language, color coding, study tours, and sharing knowledge represents an innovative approach to empowering marginalized communities and educating older women worldwide. Success is achieved through decentralizing control and demystifying technology.

This multiple-themed special issue addresses normativity and interrogates the quotidian as a perpetual site of struggle and contestation. A primary focus of this issue is to interrogate, explore, archive, and analyze the myriad experiences of women transnationally through the lens of diverse scholars across multiple disciplines. It demonstrates the acute need to attend to women’s vulnerable realities that become more compounded by rapid world shifts such as the COVID-19 pandemic but are entrenched due to the interplay of gender, race, class, and geopolitical positioning. The majority of writers and editors writing from the Global South in this collection foreground critical insights into the crises women confront and adapt to, demonstrating a capacity to combat erasure in order to make women’s realities visible. The essays generate knowledge from women and about women, the environments they traverse, and the spaces they curate. As such, this collection functions as a transformative narrative for women of color, encompassing multiple feminist identities and orientations that are attentive to women’s experiences and practices. It sustains a feminist ethics of care and understands socially constructed borders as contemporary sites of investigation. By oscillating within and beyond the bounds of conventional academic discipline, the perspectives featured allow for an alternate view of women. To leverage Sara Ahmed’s concept of unhappy vs. happy endings in her book *The Promise of Happiness*, women’s mundane struggles enable a “political gift” (Ahmed 88) that entices us to contemplate what women can do, make visible, and produce in their continued disruption of patriarchal systems. In this vein, this collection reimagines a future by tending to past and present issues while delineating possibilities and solutions to alleviate women’s material conditions of oppression.

**References**
