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# Introduction, or What Is the Future We Yearn For?

*The Future That Was* is about yearning. It is about the yearning of women as a transnational project of knowledge at a time of disillusionment with decolonization in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> As people confronted ongoing crises of neocolonialism, patriarchal authoritarianism, and Cold War militarism, women strove for justice by researching and writing about women's lives and their visions for a different world. *The Future That Was* tells the story of Third World women who ignited a world of research on women's and sexual rights in the 1970s and 1980s and the complex legacy of this vastly unequal knowledge economy.

Third World women catalyzed a momentous expansion of knowledge about women, gender, and sexuality that transformed emancipatory politics across the world. I illuminate this history by exploring the study of women in the decolonizing world, with a focus on South Asia and the many women's networks that stretched from South Asia to the African continent, the Caribbean, the United States, and beyond. As people confronted the failures of new democracies and the fractured promises of constitutional equality, women saw in radical acts of research and writing the opportunity to argue for their place as citizens against patriarchal norms. They created research networks that reached beyond borders, built organizations to promote the

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training of women in wide-ranging fields, supported transnational women's research projects, and advocated for women's rights at the national and international levels. They staged public protests to argue for research on women's lives and equitable policy for women. These long-lasting networks, organizations, and social and political movements championed transnational research on women for decades.

Third World feminism was a reinvention of the Third World.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of this book, I argue that the very idea of the Third World was made anew by women who saw transnational solidarity as a potent tool against neocolonialism and patriarchal nationalism in the fractured global politics of the 1970s and 1980s. These researchers self-identified as Third World women and reimagined Third World internationalism as a critical alliance against authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, they claimed a collective feminist politics that reached across geographies intimately linked through global histories of colonization and enslavement and fought against enduring systems of neocolonialism, inequality, and militarism perpetuated by the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> The women who animated this world of research included a wide range of intellectuals from South Asia, the African continent, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and the United States. These highly educated urban women were often from dominant classes, ethnicities, and castes. They were trained in wide-ranging fields of research as economists, sociologists, political scientists, lawyers and legal scholars, civil servants, writers, editors, publishers, and activists.

In contrast with traditional accounts of decolonization, development, and human rights, *The Future That Was* recasts the history of decolonization through a genealogy of feminist knowledge production. I follow in the long tradition of anti-colonial thought at the intersection of intellectual history and political theory, centering Third World feminism in the history of twentieth-century political thought. Research on the world's women expanded rapidly, revolutionizing everything from foundational measures of economic and social development to frameworks of international law and citizenship and the very definition of human rights. Yet feminist research took many trajectories in an era when the failures of self-determination and economic sovereignty fed rising authoritarian movements. While many in the decolonizing world led massive revolutionary protests against patriarchal state repression, women also collaborated with the state, international organizations, and private foundations to expand research that fortified carceral governance through policies focused on the protection of women.<sup>5</sup>

Women seized the means of knowledge production, critiquing postcolonial inequality and rising authoritarianism around the world and theorizing radically just visions of the future. Women pursued the work of writing and publishing on women and gender at a scale never seen before.<sup>6</sup> They created new infrastructures for research that centered women and the pursuit of gender justice and argued for equal rights and political autonomy for women in the present and in the future. Women were writing feminism into being as they led movements, created women's studies programs, and established women and gender as legitimate subjects of scholarship. The organizational and personal papers, oral histories, and scholarship produced by Third World women form the primary archives of this book.

*The Future That Was* is the first comprehensive history of the United Nations (UN) Year and Decade for Women (1975–1985). It reveals the paradoxical dependence of international women's research on the growing infrastructures of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), private foundations, and international governance that defined a new politics of women and gender from the 1970s until today. International and transnational research projects sponsored by the UN, aid programs, national policy initiatives, and international foundations became the primary way for Third World women to pursue their aspirations to create knowledge yet also delimited the research that they produced. Women engaged the domain of development research while also at points critiquing and subverting the limits of international funding structures. I recast standard depictions of Third World women and reimagine the seemingly sterile records of women and development by bringing together wide-ranging archives that include thousands of pages of international conference proceedings, state and NGO policy reports to feminist anthologies, women's oral histories, feminist journals, speeches, memoirs, and poetry.

This is a history powered by jet travel and new forms of communication and archived through the popular technologies of the photocopier, the handheld camera, and the camcorder. Feminist ideas traveled across languages, lexicons, and borders. Women moved between geographies to be in community with one another, gathered at international conferences around the world, crowded together in classrooms and auditoriums, and wrote and published in multiple languages. This period from the 1970s through the early 1990s saw the unprecedented expansion of feminist exchange around the globe, with women gathering together in geographies spanning from Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi to Delhi, Cairo, Lahore, London, New York, Boston, Kingston, Colombo, Ulaanbaatar, Algiers, Dakar, and Beijing.

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As they moved across borders and disciplines, Third World women pursued the decolonization of knowledge itself. This history unfolds in chapters organized around critical sites and genres that have defined the trajectory of feminist research: the conference, the report, the organization, the book, and the protest. Through the rise of these now dominant forms and genres, I analyze the promises, challenges, and failures of feminist thought in the decolonizing world, reflecting on a generation of researchers who wrote women into existence in the face of persistent threats of violence.

### **The Future That Wasn't**

I write this history fifty years after the rapid expansion of aspirational international feminist research that reached across geographies, policymaking, and funding networks. The texts, organizations, and mass movements that resulted from the expansive study of women have defined not only how we think about women and sexual minorities around the world but the very measures we use to assess development, human rights, and democratic governance. What has this history of ideas created, and how are we to understand the massive expansion of women's writing and thinking in this moment? To reflect on the life of feminist thought now is a monumental project. It requires collective thinking on what genres, research infrastructures, and institutions have been monumentalized through the study of women and gender, and what structures must *fall*.

To write this account I went to the past to understand a world of women's writings about their present crises and future aspirations. But I also looked to the future. Or rather, I looked to my own present to better understand the eventual future that followed this moment of international feminist research of the 1970s and 1980s.

The futures that Third World women worked toward in the 1970s and 1980s have now been replaced by the reality of our present. It is a cruel reality. It is a present where hard-earned protections for reproductive rights have been wholly demolished in the United States and in the many US foreign policies and aid packages that dictate reproduction and health around the world. Where the most promising radical anti-colonial constitutional democracies of their times—first India, then South Africa—face endemic issues of majoritarian nationalism, exclusionary citizenship, and gendered violence manifest in cultures of xenophobic mob violence and rape that target women and minorities who dissent. Where homosexuality is condemned again and again in the postcolonial world as a foreign import, just as

feminism has been dismissed by reactionary political movements for decades as alien and dangerous to society. Where claims that women's, queer, and trans rights are outside of "tradition" serve as the primary justification for virulent anti-women and anti-LGBTQ legislation in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Where anti-trans legislation and policy sweeping the United States, the United Kingdom, and the rest of the world, justified through biological determinist arguments about state protection for women and children, threatens the very survival of trans and nonbinary people.

It is a present where unfolding crises of war, colonial occupation, and state-enforced famine decried by Third World women fifty years ago now produce some of the most horrifying scenes of war and genocide, with suffering and scales of visible death at levels that the world has not experienced in a century. Where people are forced to migrate as a result of global inequality and climate catastrophes wrought by greed. Where people die by the thousands crossing treacherous borderlands, suffering preventable diseases in emergency camps, and drowning in makeshift vessels in the sea, uncounted in life and death.

This is not the radically just world imagined by a generation of women who worked tirelessly to build different possibilities for women in the future. They wrote, dreamed, organized, researched, compiled, edited, published, gathered together, danced, recited poetry, chanted slogans, fought, protested, and wrote still more to build a world where research and writing would produce real, substantive gains for women and minoritized communities. Their imagined future is not our present.

It is hard not to critically assess where we are now, more than half a century after the global research on women that made possible transnational and national agendas, policies, institutions, and research that transformed the way we think and write, not only about women, gender, and sexuality but about the effects of everything from development to democratic politics. There is no question that feminist advocacy and research have transformed many measurable policies for women and sexual minorities and created a visible politics of international sexual rights today. Across languages and geographies, there are countless research centers, women's studies programs and curricula, national commissions and bureaus, and laws and policies committed to the study of women and gender. There are now standardized social scientific genres of state and NGO research utilized by feminist, queer, and trans rights organizations that work to translate the lives and worth of women and sexual minorities into measurable forms for international organizations, nation-states, donors, and a broader public.

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Yet, despite the massive incitement to knowledge about women and gender made possible by new policies, laws, and educational institutions, research has often had a limited effect on substantive social and political change in much of the world. The inconsistent impact of feminist research on the lives of women in the decolonizing world is largely attributable to a total lack of will and enforcement from many states that have stifled any possibility of justice and equality for women in and beyond policy and law. With the expansion of international institutions that assess states through a rubric of women's development but offer few enforcement mechanisms, women's and gender rights have been co-opted by postcolonial democracies and authoritarian states alike. The widespread proliferation of women's bureaus, commissions, and gender research centers has allowed most postcolonial states with little interest in advancing women's rights to use them as an alibi signaling state compliance with international norms of gender equality and women's rights. And under new attacks in the present, many international aid programs and states have rapidly dismantled and defunded research infrastructures focused on women and sexual minorities.

Today the lives of most girls and women of the world remain precarious. In many places, despite dozens of laws, national commissions, and reports, women's lives are measurably worse than they were decades ago. The goals of justice and freedom for women have been undermined by twenty-first-century politics that claim to protect the interests of women while reasserting patriarchal domination over the bodies and lives of women and sexual minorities. Authorities traffic ideas of the protection of women as a justification for the expansion of the security state, the adoption of surveillance technologies, and the enactment of anti-queer and anti-trans legislation.<sup>7</sup>

For the past twenty-five years, as a result of the ongoing global war on terror, the domain of gender research and sexual rights has been dominated by increasingly militarized and securitized states, neoliberal funding structures, and influential right-wing religious networks that have perversely deployed the language of gender and women's rights to expand carceral structures directed at women and sexual minorities.<sup>8</sup> Especially since the 1990s, Third World women's research has been increasingly marginalized and privatized through a model of funding based on donors, creating dependencies for the work of women's research that have often emptied these projects of their radical political potential.<sup>9</sup> States deploy neoliberal ideas of women's empowerment on behalf of projects of racialized and caste-ist policing, war, and debt programs that encourage women to take on debt in the form of "microloans" that often create endless cycles of dependency.<sup>10</sup>

Even as *The Future That Was* accounts for the possibilities and limits of Third World feminist movements and intellectual projects, I do not subscribe to a simple diagnostic assessment of success or failure. Such didactic thinking has become a primary way in which many scholarly frameworks assess the value of social and political movements for civil rights during the twentieth century. This binary paradigm has limited how we understand radically democratic imaginaries of women and minorities with ambitious goals of achieving self-determination and global economic redistribution.<sup>11</sup> Diagnostic assessments of social movements too often attribute failure to the ideological basis of liberatory theories and actions while not taking seriously the *content* of these complex ideas and organizations, nor accounting for the many ways dominant states and private industries suppressed, co-opted, defunded, and massively bureaucratized these movements. Evaluations of the failure of feminist projects often do not offer systemic analysis of the structural and material conditions that made the work of Third World feminist researchers fragile and dependent on the whims of national planning commissions, donors, and international priorities, often compromising their radical ideas. Such frameworks overlook the remarkable intellectual labor of women who defied and subverted these challenging conditions to build a world of feminist research and writing despite all the odds against them.

The deployment of an empty rhetoric of rights by both liberal democratic and increasingly authoritarian states today offers a stark contrast to Third World women's visions of anti-colonial self-determination, bodily autonomy, and radical freedom for all fifty years ago. For much of the twentieth century, networks of women pursued radically democratic visions of their societies by innovating frameworks of universal civil rights and justice through focused research on women's lives. They did so with full knowledge of the uncertainty and danger that resulted from writing about the complex political and social struggles of women. Women faced very real threats to their lives for expressing dissent under increasingly dangerous neocolonial structures of knowledge and power. Despite the many risks, women theorized a world free of authoritarianism at every level, linking women's liberation in the home and community to democratic rights in the state and international society.

Yet *The Future That Was* also reckons with the hierarchies and exclusions that shaped the feminist pursuit of emancipatory knowledge. I reveal the many asymmetries in geographies, disciplines, and forms of expertise perpetuated by women who claimed to represent the Third World. Class domination, caste supremacy, racism, and biological determinism shaped

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the trajectories of Third World feminist thought in the 1970s and 1980s. Exclusions defined the limits of the earliest domains of international research on the world's women, shaping later debates about gender, racism, and caste supremacy on the international stage in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>12</sup> There were many foreclosed paths for research and unrealized visions of freedom as women collectively strategized to transform the trajectory of decolonization.

### **Decolonization and the Crisis of Authoritarianism**

On September 21, 2001, the feminist network Women Living Under Muslim Laws released an urgent statement begging for caution in response to the events of September 11, as the United States threatened revenge and war against the people of Afghanistan. "Vengeance is not justice," the women declared as they warned of the long-term effects of the US war for women around the world.<sup>13</sup> The bold statement of a transnational collective of women pierced the deafening silence following the catastrophic events that had unfolded at the World Trade Center in New York just ten days before. Women Living Under Muslim Laws decried the costs of terrorism, warned of a loss of democratic rights, and condemned the rapid growth of patriarchal religious fundamentalisms in the region. The statement powerfully declared that "violence cannot eradicate terrorism" and warned that retaliatory acts of militarism by the United States would only wreak further havoc on the most vulnerable people in societies around the world. Rather, the collective insisted that the solution to global discontent and extremist antagonism had to be based in the ideas and needs of the most powerless people in times of conflict.<sup>14</sup> Retaliatory war would have profound consequences for "women in Muslim countries and communities in particular" that would suffer unspeakable consequences from military action, while ultimately the "space for alternative positions will vanish" under the impossible conditions of war.<sup>15</sup>

Women Living Under Muslim Laws is a transnational research collective of Third World women that was founded in 1984, more than twenty-five years before 9/11. For decades before 2001, the organization had been producing research and writing on the problem of religious fundamentalism that foregrounded the perspectives of women and insisted that women's equality was at the heart of the struggle for self-determination. By the early 1990s, Women Living Under Muslim Laws boasted an extensive research network with thousands of active women in over forty countries.<sup>16</sup> Their fears about military retaliation by the United States and an unfolding

catastrophe that could lead to total democratic impossibility in Muslim societies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East became a tragic reality.

The September 11 attacks took place during my first week of college at a university in America's heartland. While public discourse in the United States was dominated by fervent patriotism, many worked to envision an anti-war movement for the twenty-first century. As a student, I, like so many, looked to histories of war, ideologies of colonialism, and critical theories of anti-colonial liberation and decolonization to try to understand this world-changing event. I have distinct memories in the days that followed September 11, 2001, of witnessing the power of dissenting statements, like the bold words of *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, that countered patriotic calls for indiscriminate war. In the face of dangerous ideologies of racism and religious prejudice and the total suspension of critique of the US government, this transnational collective of women insisted that the most vulnerable people of the world had the right to survive and pursue democratic sovereignty. Feminism, against calls for retribution and vengeance, asserted an ethics of the living in the face of fear.

Decolonization, as was clear in that moment in 2001, never ended.<sup>17</sup> The second half of the twentieth century saw a world emerging from the horrors of World War II, nuclear devastation, and the violence of border-making partitions. As global powers reorganized themselves into what would be a decades-long Cold War, people around the world began to push for emancipation and decolonization with new claims to sovereignty and self-determination. Despite the promises of liberation, the coercion, violence, and oppression of erstwhile imperial regimes did not disappear at the formal end of colonialism. New regimes of domination emerged based in the global reorganization of economic inequality and ongoing systems of colonial domination.

A rapid succession of decisive events accelerated long-standing anti-colonial resistance and movements for decolonization. In the 1940s, the world had ruptured with the dramatic partitioning and restructuring of states across the postcolonial world and Europe. What resulted were seeds of violence and conflict that would grow in the decades to come in multiple partitions, new economic dependencies, and the novel state technologies of apartheid. By the early 1950s, the promise of anti-colonial liberation had swept the colonized world, as fervent struggles for self-determination emerged in rapid succession.<sup>18</sup> The landmark 1955 Bandung Conference and Afro-Asian solidarity conferences that followed powerfully declared a transnational commitment to postcolonial sovereignty grounded in democratic

ideas of self-determination “based on the will of the people,” in the language of political theorist and historian Partha Chatterjee.<sup>19</sup>

Democracy and self-determination for people—for *all* people—was totally new in this moment, and it was a revelation. These pivotal events introduced the first real possibility of formal citizenship for all. By the early 1960s, people around the world were gaining access to the vote, building independent governments, and creating new alliances between decolonizing states, from the paradigm-shifting civil rights struggle in the United States to global movements for decolonization. These novel experiments with universal rights marked the first time democratic citizenship could be claimed by the darker peoples and nations of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout this book, I use the phrase “the decolonizing world” to refer to regions in Asia, the Middle East, the African continent, and the Caribbean undergoing formal and active processes of decolonization following the decline of European colonial powers after World War II. But it is also a critical reframing of the world as a *whole* in the moment of decolonization, away from the standard historiographic framing of “the Cold War” to center the history of decolonization in the postwar period. The concept reflects ongoing efforts by most people of the world to subvert and fight against formal colonial structures of power that had spread from the late eighteenth century, with a particular focus on the former British Empire, regions in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and territories increasingly under the control of the US empire in the twentieth century. The term “the decolonizing world” further encompasses ongoing struggles against the enduring residues of coloniality in the postcolony: ongoing movements against the authoritarian nation-states that sustained their power through neocolonial dependencies.

Women took on critical roles in early anti-colonial movements and nation-building projects, organizing major movements and transnational conferences for women between the 1920s and 1940s.<sup>21</sup> However, women’s rights were often on the periphery of the formal global politics of decolonization that followed in non-alliance and the internationalism of self-determination in the 1950s and 1960s as many postcolonial leaders worked to erase women’s contributions to anti-colonial liberation struggles. The “Final Communiqué”—the official declarations for freedom and independence for all colonized peoples that resulted from the Bandung Conference—outlined areas where all people would participate in broad liberatory projects of self-determination.<sup>22</sup> However, the statement and the conference proceedings offered no specifics about the conditions or rights of women, nor did it treat

women as a distinct political class despite decades of political organizing for women's issues during the anti-colonial struggle, although Bandung would come to have a profound influence on women's movements that followed.<sup>23</sup> Yet, in these early decades of decolonization, women's rights were to be perpetually subordinate to the broader nationalist project and the reorganization of the global alliances.<sup>24</sup>

Just as people called for national self-determination and democratic citizenship as non-alignment politics gained momentum, the United Nations became a critical site for a new world-making politics of economic and political self-determination and radical redistribution for decolonizing states, as conceptualized by political theorist Adom Getachew.<sup>25</sup> But these novel experiments at the UN were quickly replaced by the reality of global development priorities that were far from the radical ideas of redistribution of many anti-colonial thinkers.<sup>26</sup> By 1960, the UN had declared its first-ever major theme for a decade, the first official Decade of Development, from 1960 to 1970.<sup>27</sup> This declaration of the theme of development would shape the UN priority areas related to women, with "development" as one of three key themes in the International Women's Year (1975) and Decade for Women (1976–1985) that followed.

The Cold War shifted the trajectory of global decolonization away from the radical redistributive goals of formerly colonized people. New states in the decolonizing world, largely ruled by an educated elite, looked to profit from the tug-of-war between the United States and the Soviet Union by promoting nationalisms and desperately working to modernize their states and economies. Under the guise of development, postcolonial states deployed new technologies that centered women as key measures, including the increasingly powerful disciplines of demography, population studies, and development economics to govern, surveil, aggregate, and often exploit people newly constituted as the population-citizenry.

By the 1970s, the dream of self-determination and true democratic citizenship had been replaced by the nightmare of neocolonialism, economic dependency, and unending political insecurity.<sup>28</sup> Global relationships of dependency created more inequality in an already profoundly unequal world through new development programs and infrastructures of debt in the creation of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). And in 1979, the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan shocked the world and inaugurated a new era of reactionary religious populist movements that stretched from regions in the Middle East to South Asia to the African continent.<sup>29</sup> The authoritarian states that resulted deployed a

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rhetoric of anti-colonial sovereignty while implementing emergency laws that suspended civil liberties alongside authoritarian patriarchal laws and policies that denied women access to basic citizenship and systematically dispossessed women.<sup>30</sup>

In 1981, political theorist Eqbal Ahmad brilliantly diagnosed the crisis of authoritarianism in the Third World in foundational essays on the fracture of postcolony states, what he named the “pathology of power” fostered by neocolonialism and postcolonial authoritarian politics.<sup>31</sup> He argued that the dramatic shift from the promise of constitutional democracy to autocracy resulted in the global rise of perverse hybrid states that merged enduring colonial structures of governance with a new global technocratic elite that profited from exploitative flows of global capital. These authoritarian postcolonial states mimicked but undermined democratic governance.<sup>32</sup> The crisis of authoritarianism plagued states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that promised true democracy and development. Yet, paradoxically, global development and modernization programs did little to help most of the people of the world. For Ahmad, neocolonial structures of global domination and their regional puppet neofascist states kept most people subordinate in systems of governance built without their consent and ruled by an elite that profited from militarism, carcerality, and economic exploitation.

It was in this moment of insecurity and cascading crises of global inequality that women’s issues, two decades after the Bandung Conference, achieved formal visibility on the international stage at an unprecedented scale with the official UN International Women’s Year and Decade for Women. As the politics of non-alignment and self-determination fractured in global conflicts over oil and religious nationalism, this moment fomented the rise of international women’s movements in the 1970s. Ultimately, it was the declaration of the first International Women’s Year in 1975, followed by the declaration of the UN Decade for Women between 1975 and 1985, that served as the single most important catalyst for the massive expansion of research and writing on global women.<sup>33</sup> Were it not for the UN Year and Decade for Women and the subsequent global conference on women in Beijing, international research on women as we know it would not exist.

The formalization of three central themes for International Women’s Year and the Decade for Women—development, equality, and peace—extended the long-standing UN commitment to development to the domain of women’s rights. The International Women’s Year and Decade for Women intersected with the second UN Decade of Development between 1970 and 1980, an overlap that was critical for the trajectory of international research

on women in the decolonizing world; in its first decade, that research had been focused almost entirely on questions of development. In this moment, Soviet influence began to recede from the domain of international women's research, although Soviet alliances remained significant for the final Afro-Asian women's conferences and the 1985 conference of non-aligned states on women and development. By the late 1980s, international research on women was primarily dominated by foreign policy priorities and foundations in the United States and northern and western Europe.

The widespread emphasis on development led to a critical epistemic shift in which the metrics of development were inextricably tied to the study of women, converging under the umbrella infrastructure of women and development (WAD). As women and gender came to have global prominence through the new paradigm of WAD, it was reframed quickly as women *in* development (WID), and later the paradigm was broadened under the policy umbrella of gender and development (GAD).<sup>34</sup> In the late 1980s, women's internationalism expanded from its singular focus on women's economic development to gender and human rights, most notably through the rise of international debates about violence against women.<sup>35</sup>

With the rapid expansion of women's internationalism, the idea of gender transformed from being a seemingly benign term treated as synonymous with "women" to an increasingly politicized concept that signified the potential reorganization of modern societies based in the critiques of patriarchy and heterosexual reproduction.<sup>36</sup> By the early 1990s, as scholars and activists reimagined social and political life in new theories and policy initiatives focused on gender, the idea came to symbolize everything from women's economic independence to sexual rights to critiques of gendered violence. By the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, the priorities of the organization UN Women were dominated by expansive ideas of gender empowerment and novel claims to women's human rights through the mandates of international law.<sup>37</sup>

While feminist internationalism expanded from the 1970s, women faced growing authoritarian repression at home. In wide-ranging postcolonial spaces, from South Asia to Africa, the most marginalized communities were sterilized and forcibly displaced in programs of development and planning, everything from books to public assembly was banned, and protesters were policed, jailed, and disappeared. Those who dissented were labeled as anti-national, traitorous, blasphemous, dangerously feminist, and a threat to the state. And perhaps no dissent was as visible as that of women, who refused the impossible conditions of silence by writing about the urgency of women's freedom and taking to the streets.

## The Feminist Reinvention of the Third World

When I set out to write a book on the history of Third World feminist thought, I imagined a utopian moment of autonomous women's movements that came long before the powerful reach of the acronyms of development, international NGO networks, and later neoliberal funding structures could be felt. I aspired to uncover a lost history of ideas of women's freedom at the center of Third World ideas of solidarity from the 1950s before the overwhelming dominance of development. Yet the early period of decolonization was largely dominated by men. This moment saw the rise of utopian movements that culminated in the nationalist cause, which deferred fulfillment of the promise of women's liberation until sovereignty was fully realized.

But something extraordinary happened in the decades that *followed* the early period of decolonization and non-alliance. By the early 1970s, Third World women had mobilized in the face of increasing crises in response to and in spite of the fractures of the utopianism of solidarity and developmental nationalism that characterized an earlier moment of Third Worldism. As the postcolonial state faltered, women insisted on leading internationalist movements and creating usable knowledge that could solve the problems of their time.

In focusing at length on the 1970s and 1980s, I turn away from the utopianism and recuperative romance that has dominated much of the scholarship on solidarity, Afro-Asia, and Third Worldism during the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, I foreground this later period to understand how women resuscitated transnational solidarity and created a new vision of Third Worldism in the face of widespread disillusionment and despair. What are the visions of politics for people whose dreams of freedom went unfulfilled with formal decolonization, despite the granting of legal sovereignty to the darker peoples and nations of the world? How did women argue for their freedom when the very liberatory framings of anti-colonialism were co-opted and perversely deployed by authoritarian states to enforce patriarchal ideas of tradition that systematically dispossessed women? How was such freedom to be achieved in the crisis of their authoritarian present?

Third World women reinvigorated Third Worldism through novel critiques of neocolonialism and authoritarianism. By the time women were gathering at international conferences and in transnational research collectives in the 1970s, the dreams of global redistributive plans, unified Afro-Asian political alliances, and secular ideas of radically democratic internationalism had faded into the nightmare of famine, war, and global debt. In

response to these crises, women looked to grounded research on women to organize against and critique the cruel effects of increasing global inequality.

By *Third World women* and *Third World feminism* I refer to concepts that originated in wide-ranging radical movements for decolonization in many parts of the world and women of color feminisms in the First World during the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the earliest uses of the term “Third World women” can be found in the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), an internationalist collective based in New York and California. Emerging from Black women’s political organizing and the women’s wing of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for civil rights in the United States, the TWWA was perhaps the first organization to conceptualize the term “Third World women.”<sup>38</sup> The idea of Third World women was critical for Black feminist thought that followed, notably in the early work of Third World feminist philosopher and activist Angela Yvonne Davis and in the foundational statement of the Combahee River Collective.<sup>39</sup> Other genealogies of the idea are found in early uses of complementary terms of solidarity among women intimately involved in anti-colonial movements who claimed a defiant solidarity politics among women through Afro-Asianism and Third Worldism in the aftermath of the Bandung Conference. Many iterations of the project that followed expanded the use of the term to Third World feminism.

Yet in the ten years after the Third World Women’s Alliance made its powerful assertions of Third Worldism in the early 1970s, the designation “Third World women” was often reduced to a developmental descriptor and pejorative term, especially by US development programs and in research conducted by American women.<sup>40</sup> As early as 1984, in her field-defining study, self-declared Third World feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty offered a devastating critique of the objectification of women of the so-called developing world through the idea of Third World women, which had by then been reframed as a patronizing category in First World research on women’s development.<sup>41</sup> For Mohanty, the proliferation of development studies reflected the epistemic domination of Western women researchers through their racist objectification of other women.

While the term was used disparagingly in development circles, intellectuals defiantly claimed the concepts of Third World women and Third World feminism as a collective liberatory politics through novel interventions in critical theory, particularly Black women, women of color, and feminist internationalists.<sup>42</sup> Third World women and feminism became key ideas for the thousands of women engaged in the work of research who

produced new theories of solidarity against the exploitation of women and gendered oppression in diverse postcolonial geographies.<sup>43</sup> Expansive and geographically promiscuous ideas of Third World women and Third World feminism were invoked by women around the world, including intellectuals and activists in the decolonizing world and American women of color organizing under a wide range of categories including women of color, Black, Latinx/Chicanx, Asian American, Arab American, and postcolonial feminist.<sup>44</sup> These visions of feminist solidarity beyond borders directly shaped the emerging concept of *transnational feminisms* after 1989 with the end of the Cold War, an idea that conceptualized alliance against the tumultuous politics of economic liberalization and neoliberal NGO-ization.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps no idea was as significant in catalyzing this domain of Third World feminist research as *neocolonialism*. As conceptualized by Third World women in the 1970s and 1980s, neocolonialism was powerfully framed as a critique of the domination of knowledge. As Ghanaian political theorist, politician, and revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah declared in his landmark 1965 text, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, neocolonialism created a facade of newly independent states that were economically and politically subjugated to Western power, with no true sovereignty.<sup>46</sup> Third World women reconceptualized neocolonialism as primarily a form of *epistemic* domination that resulted from the continued dependency of decolonizing states. Women from the decolonizing world diagnosed the paradoxes of incomplete and failed processes of decolonization by linking neocolonial domination to rising authoritarianism, which created the cruel conditions of patriarchy and poverty that women faced every day. The critical feminist concept of neocolonialism as epistemic domination remains, I believe, one of the most potent, if underutilized, ideas in contemporary critical and feminist theory, one that denaturalizes the unequal structures of knowledge that continue to shape how we study postcolonial societies.

Through these critiques of neocolonialism and the perversion of sovereignty in postcolonial authoritarianism, Third World women confronted the reality of their present: new global systems of violence and exploitation increasingly threatened the lives of women and their children. The first generation of Third World researchers with access to higher education felt it was their duty to record and account for the cruel conditions of scarcity and gendered subordination that defined the experiences of most of the women in the world. Third World feminism centered women and the realities they faced, insisting that bearing witness to women's subjugation was critical to the reform and flourishing of postcolonial societies.

Third World women committed themselves to seeking grounded, comparative, *situated* knowledge based in empirical research produced in diverse geographies. For this generation of women, empirical research based in the detailed study of the lives and livelihoods of women was essential to combat the discontent of an increasingly fractured world. These transnational theories looked to similar conditions among women across geographies to identify the failures of the nation-state and the neocolonial policies that perpetuated women's subordination. Women acutely diagnosed how militarism, displacement, and deprivation created impossible conditions for people, and they emphasized that it was primarily women and children who suffered the immeasurable harms that resulted. The agenda of Third World feminist research addressed but extended far beyond narrow understandings of "women's issues" focused on women's work and reproduction. Women insisted on situated, systemic forms of research that linked the conditions of women to global economic inequality, problems of food insecurity and famine, access to health care, the violence of war and border-making, and the cruel conditions of forced migration and displacement.

But the work of feminist research was always constrained. In a world dominated by foundation capital and the priorities of development, there was little possibility of truly autonomous feminist research for Third World women. Women's research and writing in the decolonizing world was rarely free from the mandates of the dominant research paradigms of development and the unequal material infrastructures of internationalism.

Examples abound of early Third World women's intellectual endeavors in the 1970s that had to fit the narrow paradigms of development to gain access to basic funds. We might look to the experience of early women's research in Bangladesh. As people fought a devastating war and genocide in Bangladesh in 1971, the Ford Foundation was already on the ground funding the first research projects on Bangladeshi women.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there is no way to write the history of feminist ideas without acknowledging the central place of the Ford Foundation in the establishment of women's studies as a field of inquiry around the world.<sup>48</sup> Ford provided the seed funding for almost all major centers, institutes, and departments dedicated to the study of women in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the United States, including the first women's studies program at Spelman College, the renowned historically Black women's liberal arts college. Minoritized women in poorer nations and communities had little choice but to create research organizations at the interstices of funding for food

aid, development conferences, and the shifting priorities of international philanthropy.

In response to this massive expansion of women in development studies, Third World women took advantage of the resources made available to build infrastructures for research while simultaneously making substantive critiques of the neocolonial nature of development studies. They created research methods and asked novel questions about women's lives and labor, insisting on the unique perspective of Third World women who had directly experienced ongoing exploitation and violence. Many women pursued state-based feminist research with the hope that their ideas would be realized through policy reforms and laws impacting women in newly established postcolonial states. Other women, including those aligned with socialist Third Worldism, organized research in direct opposition to state policy with the goal of revolutionizing the very ways in which women became legible as political and economic subjects. As intellectuals working both in and against the state, Third World feminists demanded alternative approaches to women's rights, insisting on the importance of women's own ideas about radical equality and self-determination.<sup>49</sup>

## **A History without Prophets**

Third World feminists, it is often said, understood what was to come. These visionaries knew what would go wrong. They warned about the world's future ills.

Scholars and activists have often framed the lives and works of Third World women and feminisms as prophetic. The prophetic status of Third World feminisms is reflected in the way that contemporary movements cite their ideas as the height of revolutionary potential and valorize their intellectual labor and lives. Indeed, in my own search for a moment of Third World feminisms free of development and the empiricism of UN internationalism, I had hoped to recoup a truly autonomous domain of Third World feminist research from fifty years ago to help me better cope with the despair of the present.

Yet, too often contemporary scholars and activists idealize Third World feminism as a sign of moral certitude from the past that stands as a measure of today's political actions against crisis. Romantic renderings of women of color and Third World women's thought can blunt the complexity of their ideas, reducing their value to simple measures of ideological purity.<sup>50</sup> Despite the regular citation and exaltation of Third World feminist "foremothers," few

historical studies have seriously engaged at length with the actual content and histories of the promises and limits of the global Third World feminist project. Those idealized accounts of Third World women, which function as a relative measure for our own political present, preclude critical reflection on the material and political realities that they faced in building infrastructures for the study of women in the 1970s and 1980s.

The reality is that women's research and writing was differentially shaped by structures of power and access. Many of the women in this book accessed privileges of color, class, caste supremacy, education, location, urbanity, familial status and descent, and gender identity—structures of hierarchy and domination that defined the work that many women did yet often went unacknowledged. And as self-declared Third World women produced Third World women and feminism as political categories, many objectified other subaltern women as their research objects and obfuscated social hierarchies in their own societies, reproducing epistemological problems of power and knowledge that they themselves critiqued. These researchers were profoundly influential in internationalist domains of women and development.

The reality is also that Third World women's research on the world's women was often arduous, precarious, and risky—a result of the economic, political, and social insecurity that defined much feminist intellectual work in the decolonizing world outside of the First World academy. Women engaged in extensive unremunerated labor on behalf of movements, organizations, and feminist publications. They often worked on the periphery of secure employment in the traditional academy, committed their own personal funds to research and publishing, and served in contingent and precarious positions—all while also doing the unpaid reproductive and household labor that women are expected to do. As a result of long-term stress, economic difficulties, and social and political exile, many suffered from chronic and life-threatening diseases. Some were dispossessed from property and long-term security by their own families. Many women died early as a result of these conditions. And with the passing of this pathbreaking generation of women, so, too, go the unpreserved and discarded personal papers and privately held materials that documented a world of research and writing on the world's women.

I offer this cautionary note against elevating Third World and women of color feminisms to a place outside of history and critique to suggest that we gain much more from histories that attend to the extraordinary life and labor of Third World feminist ideas *and* to the epistemological and material limits of these projects. It is my goal in carefully engaging these histories

to better understand the diverse forms of situated knowledge that women produced and to account for contradictory postcolonial politics and the tenuous material conditions that shaped Third World feminist research. In the chapters of this book, we bear witness again and again to how quickly entire infrastructures of knowledge for the study of women could be, and have been, totally disassembled, defunded, and destroyed as a result of the changing whims of NGOs, international aid priorities, private foundations, and right-wing religious and neo-imperial knowledge projects.

By unburdening women of ethical certitude in every word that they produced, we can take seriously the many innovations of Third World women's thought while critically reflecting on the epistemological limits and fragile material foundations of Third World feminist research. Rather than prophesizing for our contemporary predicaments, Third World women were diagnosing their present and working to change their worlds.

It is a tragedy that the political turmoil and uncertainty that defined the present for Third World women in the 1970s and 1980s—majoritarian violence, expanding militarism, and neocolonial authoritarianism—so closely resemble and shape the problems of our present fifty years later. From these histories of Third World feminist thought, we find not only novel theories of life-making despite crises but also cautionary tales about the unfulfilled promises, conceptual limits, and material constraints of global research on women. There is much to be learned from the achievements, inadequacies, and vulnerabilities of their epistemological projects.

As I trace women's research consultancies, reports, and policy publications, I account for the domination of empirical social scientific research in the proliferation of research on the world's women in spaces of the Third World. This book cautions against the normalization of social science research by liberal internationalism and the wholesale reliance on comparative global measures in the late twentieth century, which has dominated research on women for decades.<sup>51</sup> Researchers increasingly exalted global metrics of women's social and economic subordination in emancipatory projects on the international stage. In the decades that followed the UN Decade for Women, the widespread dependence on narrow measures of gender and development made women and sexual minorities particularly vulnerable to authoritarian attacks on social scientific expertise. What is made possible, and what is lost, when women take up the project of empirical social science to try to realize their visions of justice and equality?

The descriptive argument for rights, "women make up half of the world," based in biologically deterministic arguments about women as

a demographic monolith, has served as a primary justification for Third World feminist politics for the past fifty years. Women have built and relied on an unequal knowledge economy that utilizes demographic proof of sexual difference to prove women's worth. These knowledge structures have established a novel mode of understanding social life that M. Murphy has powerfully diagnosed as the "economization of life."<sup>52</sup> There is a troubling biological determinism in international feminism from this moment that resulted from the dominance of social science research on women. Multiple ideologies of domination crept into these domains of research, including naturalized ideas of biological womanhood, caste subjection, racial supremacy, elite urban hierarchies, and class domination. These issues plagued women researchers and delimited the trajectories of research on women for decades after.

Feminist researchers looked to demography as destiny. Through careful engagements with feminist conferencing, publishing, and report writing, I critically engage wide-ranging researchers from the decolonizing world who participated in the development and replicated social scientific epistemologies of family planning, development economics, population research, quantitative metrics, and indices of development.<sup>53</sup> I suggest that Third World women invested in empirical approaches to the study of women to prove the worth of women in a liberatory framework of rights and to have demonstrable "evidence" of the everyday subjugation of women. Yet the exaltation of empiricist methods in women's research produced an almost total reliance on narrow social science measures as the singular approach to the study of women in the decolonizing world. I reveal the marginalization of humanistic and theoretical approaches to the study of women in the decolonizing world and the near-total absence of infrastructural or material support to study literary, philosophical, and theoretical frameworks in international women's studies curricula and programs.

International women's development transformed the priorities of research and policymaking through a new quantifiable social science of womanhood that has defined modern rights and international development agendas from the 1970s until today. These domains of research have often subsumed questions of women's liberation, sexual autonomy, and bodily choice through the seemingly neutral framework of quantitative demographics, the logic of sex ratios, and the language of economic development. A new lexicon of keywords in women and development obfuscated women's political struggles through the technocratic language of poverty eradication, obscuring ongoing movements against class exploitation and caste

subjection as well as global movements against racism, histories of enslavement, and racial difference.<sup>54</sup> Terminology like “the status of women,” “women’s empowerment,” “population measures,” and “development indices” masked systems of domination and subordination and reduced these critical sites of politics to descriptors that functioned in service of social scientific empiricism. This conceptual obfuscation was compounded and replicated by Third World researchers who were employed in the machinery of research on women and development.

Third World feminist research was not monolithic, and its variations reflected the vexed geopolitics of internationalism and changing global hierarchies of domination and subordination that marked this moment. Over the course of this book, I document the *asymmetry of Third World feminism*, particularly the dominance of women with access to English-language higher education in the new world of research built through the machinery of the UN. India in particular dominated as the key exemplar of the developing world in the emerging domains of women and development and Third World feminisms in the 1970s. Upper-caste elite Indian women engaged in women and development research were highly visible on the global stage and had access to epistemic and political authority in the space of law, development, and research on women.<sup>55</sup> This asymmetry became more exaggerated over the 1970s and 1980s as development economics from India came to dominate the domain of global development and key Indian women took prominent roles in shaping international women’s studies at international diplomatic and scholarly conferences and gained access to US publishing venues.<sup>56</sup> This difference in access was the direct outcome of elite women’s access to education as a result of a long history of robust educational institutions in India. Whereas, for example, the establishment of the African university was a key project of decolonization from the 1960s to the 1980s, colonial and then postcolonial India had decades of formal structures for women’s education from the early twentieth century as well as institutionalized elite women’s movements from the late nineteenth century that had long shaped international norms of women’s rights.<sup>57</sup> Women of the decolonizing world who inherited long-standing English-language educational and organizational infrastructures came to have more prominent roles during the UN Year and Decade for Women.

As a history of ideas and knowledge production, this book is not a history of Third World women’s *movements*, although many social and political movements are critical sites for the rapid expansion of feminist research and appear throughout the chapters that follow.<sup>58</sup> Nor do the many diverse texts

and publications that form the primary archives of this book represent *all* forms of writing produced by Third World women, particularly proliferative writings like the political pamphlets that women have authored as part of social movements and political parties. Feminist research has taken many diverse forms, often extending far beyond the printed page. My hope is that this historical account becomes one among many that take seriously that women seized the means of knowledge production and shaped an epistemological revolution for women's rights and liberation in the late twentieth century.

Nor do I claim to have written the comprehensive history of *all* Third World women or to have represented every aspect of Third World feminist research around the world. In its primary focus on transnational feminist research projects that reached from South Asia to the African continent, the Caribbean, and the United States, this book does not chronicle at length the histories of Third World women's research in spaces like Latin America and Southeast Asia. Yet *The Future That Was*, in its focus on intellectual histories and research infrastructures, offers key lessons for comparative fields and transregional histories in which women have pushed back against authoritarianism using the tools of knowledge production.<sup>59</sup> We urgently need more studies from diverse geographies and languages that center the momentous rise of transnational feminist research and writing in the history of ideas in the twentieth century.

Today the lives and life-worlds of these researchers are endangered in fragile and decaying archives that are again under threat amid a new wave of rising authoritarian states. Their powerful transnational work has been reduced at many points to a stream of acronyms that appear in official state and NGO documents. And the decades-long efforts of women to create a proliferative future for feminist research has been overshadowed by the rapid decline of the authority of international law and international human rights, the increasing dominance of private donor expectations, and demanding managerial norms placed on feminist workers and women's organizations that undermine the independence of women's research.<sup>60</sup>

### **The Future That Was**

Women in saris, salwar kameez, and shirts and jeans sit and stand close to one another. Taken at a monthlong workshop on "Women and Development" in Koitta, (Manikganj) Bangladesh, held in March and April 1986, two consecutive photographs reveal shifting moments from a scene of a



**FAO/FFHC - One Month Workshop on Women & Deveopment, Koitta, Bangladesh, March/April-1986**  
(4<sup>th</sup> from back row) Khushi Kabir, (extreme right) Amrita Chachhi, (next to her) Kumudini Samuel, (next to her) Sultana, (in front kneeling) Chitra, (behind) Kamla Bhasin, (in the middle) Padmini, Sunila, Lala, Leena (middle) Shama, Mumtaz Begum, Mamta

*source: asr resource centre*

**ASR**



**FAO/FFHC - One Month Workshop on Women & Deveopment, Koitta, Bangladesh, March/April-1986**  
(4<sup>th</sup> from back row) Khushi Kabir, (extreme right) Amrita Chachhi, (next to her) Kumudini Samuel, (next to her) Sultana, (in front kneeling) Chitra, (behind) Kamla Bhasin, (in the middle) Padmini, Sunila, Lala, Leena (middle) Nighat Said Khan, Mumtaz Begum, Mamta

*source: asr resource centre*

**ASR**

**FIGURE I.1. Upper and lower: Women and Development Workshop, March and April 1986, Koitta, Bangladesh. Applied Socio-economic Research (ASR)/Nighat Said Khan Archival Collection.**

group of women posing for a photo. Looking at the two photographs, the viewer gets a clear sense of the animated space of the workshop. There are shifting positions between the photos, with changing glances, expressions, and radiant smiles. Women move in and out of the frame. A few women hold papers, but most just hold each other.

The intimacy of the group is undeniable. Women casually drape their arms around each other, touch hands, embrace one another. Looking at these two photographs, one can imagine in the way hands and bodies shift between shutter clicks the lively interactions that shaped the workshop. Perhaps these relationships developed over the course of the monthlong gathering. Surely, because of the geographical distances and national borders that define the fractured worlds of the subcontinent, many had not met before the workshop. Maybe over a matter of days, women went from unfamiliar nods and distant hellos to intimate laughter and hand-holding, their bodies coming closer and closer together.<sup>61</sup> Like so many workshops from this period, there may have been passionate debates and disagreements as participants asked what development was and whether aid would actually change the lives of women. Perhaps unspoken and unacknowledged hierarchies of caste, status, education, and touch shaped relationships between international workshop participants and the local working women who served food and cleaned the workshop venue. No doubt, women experienced shared histories of border-making, gendered violence, genocide, war, and famine that defined the shattered lives and geographies of the subcontinent. Women who were once strangers as a result of national divisions no longer were.

We might contrast the intimacy of these group photographs with those well-known official photographs of the many formal political meetings and conferences of postcolonial men that shaped twentieth-century non-alignment and Third World internationalism. In archetypal images of international conferences and diplomatic meetings, like the images of the famous Asian-African conference at Bandung in 1955, notable politicians and delegates are centered in the frame. Sometimes these men sit formally at an official conference table, with their names and titles in view. Or they stand formally, shaking hands. In contrast, the photos from the 1986 workshop in Bangladesh were taken inside, without a formal table and chairs. There are no clear distinctions between those who are seated and those who are standing. They evoke the familiar vintage sensibility of many 1980s amateur images: bright colors, sepia skin tones, and fluorescent lighting, with some areas of the image slightly out of focus. Nor is there any indication of where

and who these women are—no signs memorialize the conference, and no placards within the frame formally record the event for posterity.

The photographs are carefully preserved in the extraordinary archives of Applied Socio-economic Research (ASR), a feminist organization in Lahore, Pakistan, that thrived for over forty years; it is one of many research collectives I explore in the chapters that follow. This rich collection of photographs and informal video footage taken over decades gives us a glimpse of the worlds of women's gatherings in South Asia, particularly in Lahore through the 1980s and 1990s. These image archives reveal a world of women who built feminist research and writing across borders.

We learn about the particular workshop in Bangladesh in 1986 from the photo caption, added years later by ASR archivists. The captions note that the workshop was convened by two organizations represented by the acronyms FAO and FFHC—the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the Freedom From Hunger Campaign. By the 1980s, Third World feminists had reframed agricultural development and food aid as essential women's issues. The monthlong workshop brought together women working at the intersection of women and development from across South Asia. The names are incomplete, but from those named, we get a sense of the reach of this experiment under the umbrella themes of “women in development,” “food aid,” and “hunger.” The photograph includes Pakistani feminist sociologist Nighat Said Khan, the director of ASR and an important archivist of women's movements who saved and labeled all photographs from this and many other workshops. Among the participants pictured are key thinkers, including Bangladeshi feminist activist, intellectual, and environmentalist Khushi Kabir; Indian feminist scholar Amrita Chhachhi; Sri Lankan feminist and human rights activist Kumudini Samuel; Indian feminist writer and activist Kamla Bhasin; and Bangladeshi lawyer and human rights activist Sultana Kamal.

At workshops like the one held in Bangladesh in 1986, women collaborated to design new measures of women's economic life by gendering concepts like the “informal economy” and defining women's housework and unrecognized agricultural labor *as* work. They invented potent legal categories of domestic and sexual violence and advocated for legal reforms against gender-based violence in national and international law. They radically reformed definitions of rape, dowry murder, and child marriage and contested patriarchal customary laws and colonial structures of inheritance. Women came together to reimagine the relationship of religion to women's democratic rights and fought against fundamentalism across communities.

Women's organizations devised new frameworks to understand poverty and created sustainable development programs based in the perspectives of women. At international meetings and conferences, Third World women insisted on a feminist politics of location, arguing that the agendas of First World feminists obscured long histories of underdevelopment. They traveled across six continents to collaborate together. And they protested, protested, protested. They stood against dictators, were attacked by the police with batons, and were jailed for writing in public about political and legal equality for women. They demanded real and lasting decolonization.

The chapters that follow are organized around these key genres and sites of Third World feminist knowledge production: the conference, the report, the organization, the book, and the protest. These forms and genres for research on women were in formation in the 1970s and 1980s, but today they are naturalized as the dominant approach to global research on women. These structures, from the women's conference to the policy report on the status of women, came to have normative status in research and writing on women for decades to follow. Each chapter is framed through a question that reflects the dreams of Third World women as they worked to build feminist community, produce research for radical policy reform, and take to the streets in protests for women's fundamental rights.

What is the future that was, the future that Third World women imagined?<sup>62</sup>

In that future, women would be free. They would have real access to democratic rights and citizenship. It would be a world where women would be free of authoritarianism at every scale, from the home to the state. Where all women had access to literacy and education. Where the many networks, institutions, and publishers that women built in the 1970s and 1980s would flourish and continue to sustain the study of women and gender. Where women's research would transform law, and policy reform would affect real change for the most marginalized. Where women would come together to laugh and dance and perform plays that enacted their liberation. Where the household was not a site of violence, but a space organized around choice and familial support. In the future, women would have the right to work with dignity and fair compensation, and the work of women, including their reproductive labor, would be recognized *as* work. In Third World women's visions, people would reverse environmental degradation and confront climate crises that disproportionately affected women. The future would be free of perpetual war, and no people would live under occupation or in senseless incarceration. Women's sexuality would not be a site of violence

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and familial policing, but a source of freedom and power. People would not be forced to migrate or flee because of deprivation and violence. In the future, women would build a sustainable collective across difference based not only in comparative empirical data and indices but in shared aspirations for a different future.

Today their sense of yearning persists. This yearning can be found in the aspirations and movements that reimagine feminist action in the twenty-first century. We see it in the undeniable aspirations of political mobilizations that cite Third World feminism as foundational to new ideas of freedom and pursue transnational research to contest authoritarianism and endless war. Movements today work to undo an authoritarian biopolitics of life and death, to reimagine a feminism for living in the twenty-first century.<sup>63</sup>

In the future, survival would no longer be in question.

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