



THIRD WORLD APPROACHES to INTERNATIONAL LAW *Review*

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TWAILR: Reflections ~ 57/2024

#FeministTWAIL: Symposium Introduction

[Robini Sen](#), [Shaimaa Abdelkarim](#) and [Farnush Ghadery](#) introduce the #FeministTWAIL symposium with contributions by [Apeksha Gandhi](#), [Nora Jaber](#), [Reeju Ray](#), [Sue Gonzales Hauck](#), [Lynsey Mitchell](#) and [Khirad Siddiqui](#).

The Terrain of Feminist Work in TWAIL

TWAIL (Third World Approaches to International Law) and feminisms are epistemological critiques and approaches that apprehend and interrogate international law for its colonial, capitalist, patriarchal continuities. While TWAIL addresses the imperial, colonial modes of international law without implicating patriarchy, dominant liberal feminist approaches unmask their patriarchal coding without necessarily attending to colonial modernities/the empire. Lying at the dialogical intersection of these approaches, critical feminisms have refocused feminist debates on *a) the colonial-capitalist-patriarchal matrix of international law* and *b) the interventions and influences of feminist movements in/of/from the global south and their contributions to shaping the international legal system*.

While critical feminist approaches have gained traction in shaping the potential of TWAIL, they remain overshadowed by salient TWAIL perspectives and mainstream feminist international legal movements. The lack of substantive engagement with feminist approaches and praxis within mainstream TWAIL is a testimony to how these interventions are construed to be gendered/gender issue-specific rather than epistemic challenges. Despite the important contributions that critical feminist scholars have made to the development of the field, the recognition of the value of feminist theories, methods, and voices from the global South remains largely underexplored in TWAIL as well as the wider lexicon of mainstream feminist theories.

In the words of Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, through such absences, we see the formation of a [‘mainstream of the periphery’](#) that can have far-reaching consequences for a field that is firmly rooted in the endeavour to de-

centre the hegemonic mainstream. One of which, as [Vasuki Nesiiah, Karen Engle, and Dianne Otto](#) note, is the emergence of a shadowy double (a term coined by [Nancy Fraser](#)) of feminism in international law that is neither fully disavowed nor fully embraced. Thus, although we may see increasing 'feminist' success stories in the international legal landscape, it is worth interrogating how 'feminism' is conceptualised and made use of in these instances.

There is much that we owe to critical feminist approaches, particularly those emanating from marginalised spaces. They have given us tools to examine the complexities of decolonial, collaborative, and anticolonial commitments. Unpacking the homogenising and oppressive role of the quest for an anticolonial-anticapitalist-feminist legal framework, various feminists have argued for a nuanced understanding of identity, subjectivity, and interconnectedness. Critical feminist scholars have also highlighted the [manifestations of gender and race](#) in relation to the reproduction of marginalisation in feminist agendas nationally and internationally. They have validated the various epistemes that exceed the imaginations and meanings of the liberal realm in international legal reproduction.

We further acknowledge the 'feminist debt' we owe as part of the founding of this Collective. [Sumi Madhok](#) defines the concept of feminist debt as 'an acknowledgement of the possibility of doing particular research in the first instance'. While a feminist debt cannot be repaid, we endeavour to highlight and centre the existence and contributions of marginalised voices that form the foundation of so many of the academic contributions by this Collective. It is because of the resistance and struggles of marginalised communities, which we may or may not belong to, that we are able to engage in our work in the first place.

Attentive to this enduring 'feminist debt', we strongly believe in the need for a feminist consciousness that is deeply *aware of* and *resistant to* the appropriation of marginalised feminist voices in the dominant structures of both mainstream feminism and international law, including within TWAIL scholarship. This can be progressively realised through the centring of decolonial, postcolonial, transnational, Indigenous, and black feminist theories and feminist voices/approaches/epistemologies from political, historical, economical, and geographical global south spaces. The Feminist TWAIL Collective is our attempt to contribute to this resistance as well as to offer an alternative, feminist vision of engaging with international law rooted in a commitment to collectivity and solidarity across alterities. Our imagination is illustrative only and makes no claim to authority and to the exclusion of other ways.

The Feminist TWAIL Collective

The Feminist TWAIL Collective emerges from a network of early career feminist scholars who aspire to create a collaborative space for those working on critical

feminist engagements with TWAIL specifically and international law broadly. The objectives of the Collective are two-fold.

First, we wish to foreground and promote feminist TWAIL scholarships. Our Collective supports and fosters research by feminist legal scholars from the global South and those who apply decolonial/post-colonial/transnational feminist theories that transpose as many dispositions – such as that of Islamic, Indigenous, African, Chicana, and Dalit feminist practices – into the field of international law. We hope to bring together people working within the intersecting fields of TWAIL and critical feminisms, encourage collaborations, and highlight the important contributions that critical feminist voices have made and continue to make to TWAIL and international law scholarship. Through this, we wish to challenge, disrupt, and reposition TWAIL to respond to contemporary feminist thoughts and mobilisations, particularly those emanating from the global South. We especially aim to support early career researchers (including postgraduates who are considering a career in academia) by highlighting their research and connecting them to established colleagues.

Second, we wish to create and nurture a comprehensive collaborative approach and ecosystem. The Collective hopes to serve as a space of care, comradery, and solidarity across alterities. In addition to its academic agenda, we envisage the Feminist TWAIL Collective as a community. The university is being reshaped by [neoliberal political rationality](#) and, besides the increasing commodification of education, we are witnessing the individualisation of our labour as well as the transformation of scholarship into mass production (to name a few of neoliberal rationality's effects on academia). To counter these institutional demands for individual and output-oriented labour, we envision the Collective as a form of resistance grounded in a [feminist collaborative ethos](#). As founders of the Collective, the three of us have found much solace, support, and inspiration in working and conversing together consistently. With the Feminist TWAIL Collective, we extend the hospitality we found in each other to a wider community.

The First Feminist TWAIL Workshop

The Feminist TWAIL Collective began with a [writing workshop](#) and the creation of a network of established and early-career scholars working on alternative feminist epistemologies in international law. This workshop served as a first step to amplify the influence of feminist TWAIL-ers in international legal approaches and to contribute to the production of critical feminist scholarship. It was held as a one-day hybrid event in June 2022 at London South Bank University and consisted of online and in-person panel discussions on participants' research as well as a roundtable on developing a collective of feminist TWAIL-ers. Both the workshop and the founding of the Feminist TWAIL Collective benefitted immensely from the support of renowned feminist legal scholars Ratna Kapur,

Silvana Tapia Tapia, Ambreena Manji, Vidya Kumar, and Loveday Hodson, who joined the first workshop. The Collective also acknowledges the indelible and profound debt of the TWAIL network that has been foundational to our journey and ever encouraging. Through their support, we have been able to create an intergenerational space of thriving conversations about the future of the field as well as academic practice. Some of the exciting contributions to the workshop are featured as part of this *TWAILR* symposium.

Situating the Reflections: Subjecthood, Resistance, Indigeneity, and Security

This symposium showcases critical feminist engagements with questions of subjecthood, resistance, Indigeneity, and security within international law. Outlining the interrelated forms of oppression with an awareness of how our social agencies are constructed, Apeksha Gandhi interrogates the conception of womanhood in liberal promises of emancipation. Gandhi forms a link between the construction of 'woman' and the nation-building period within postcolonial India. Nora Jaber attends to the normative limitations of liberal rights-claims in relation to the conceivment of marginalised subjects in Saudi Arabia. In debates on human rights activism, the liberal agent is often conceived in an individualised autonomous realm that regulates their [desires and freedom](#). Jaber narrates Saudi women's experiences with 'petitioning for reform' to flesh out the nuances of their actions and contrasts their activism with existing international feminist agendas.

Located at the intersection of subjecthood, resistance, and indigeneity, Reetu Ray's reflection exposes the ways in which the colonial legal ordering of people and spaces, through classificatory categories such as 'Tribal', serve the post-colonial state's interest in governing the lives and bodies of Indigenous women. By critically analysing the Khasi Custom of Lineage Act in Meghalaya (a state in north-eastern India), Ray brings into sharp focus the ways in which Indigenous women are apprehended by different forms of institutional patriarchy (state, family, community etc) and the various modes of resistance they have adopted to challenge this. Reorienting notions of subjecthood and resistance through feminist analysis of public-private Sue Gonzales Hauck unpacks the relationship between the corporation and the state in this historical account of the United Fruit Company. In showing us the close ties between the historical company, modern day multinationals, and state agents, she spotlights the significance of the corporation as a significant subject of international legal history and the use of law in ways of mapping and resisting their incursion into labour practices.

Addressing questions of 'security crises' in feminist legal work, Lynsey Mitchell showcases the mobilisation of saviour narratives in the UK as part of efforts to promote gender equality globally, while contrasting this with the lack of attention to ongoing racism and patriarchy within the domestic sphere in the UK.

Mainstream feminist international legal practice has mobilised the 'security crisis' after 9/11 and integrated it with the '[crisis of sexual violence](#)' that came with the salvationist narrative of saving third world women from regressive domestic communities. The ongoing expansion of the United Nations [Women, Peace and Security](#) agenda serves as a testament to the increasing securitisation of 'feminist' discourse firmly founded on gendered, racialised, and colonial hierarchies. Mitchell links the securitisation of gender struggles debate to the promotion of the progressive narrative, in which first world societies are assumed to be the frontiers of gender equality. Adjacent to international securitisation, Khirad Siddiqui reflects on the link between the carceral state and global feminist agendas, reinforcing ideas of a global sisterhood that assumes all women share the same struggle, diverting attention from the violence of interventionist strategies under the guise of '[saving women](#)'. In Siddiqui's retelling of the killing of Qandeel Baloch – beyond the constraints of the 'sensationalist covering' as an honour crime – the notion of 'honour killing' as culturally endemic is challenged through an abolitionist feminist lens in order to account for the colonial narrative and the kind of justice that eludes carcerality.

Moving Forward: The Feminist TWAIL Collective

We understand how our institutional demands are shaped differently in multiple jurisdictions and how they come with unequal access to resources. Our collaborative praxis builds on a commitment to explore ways to [resist the neoliberal academe through community-building](#). To that end, we will host multiple conversations on how to sustain a disruptive space within and beyond the academy.

Our aim is to solidify these conversations and amplify the impact of critical feminisms in TWAIL within open-access publications. Our immediate next step is a second writing workshop that will include in-depth presentations to prepare a selected number of manuscripts for publication in a special issue on critical feminist engagement with TWAIL as part of a peer-reviewed journal.

If you wish to join the Feminist TWAIL Collective or stay up to date with our activities, please email criticalfeminismworkshop@gmail.com.