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Lila Abu-Lughod, Rema Hammami, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Laura Charney

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LILA ABU-LUGHOD, REMA HAMMAMI,
NADERA SHALHOUB-KEVORKIAN, AND LAURA CHARNEY

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SINCE ITS INCEPTION, *Feminist Studies* has explored the triumphs, contradictions, and limits of Euro-American feminism. Challenging the boundaries of the academic, *Feminist Studies* has published scholarly work that is political and creative work that is feminist. For fifty years, it has been a valued forum for activist and academic knowledge, committed to centering international perspectives and addressing intersecting forms of power.

We want to use the occasion of the journal's fiftieth anniversary to bring into focus the broad concern that motivates our collaborative project *The Cunning of Gender Violence: Geopolitics and Feminism*, which shares the journal's spirit for questioning hegemonic norms.¹ As is well known, feminism gained some success over the past decades in global institutions, with the United Nations embracing feminist principles and translating them into legal norms and policies based on human rights frameworks. But as ethnographers, practitioners, and activists who focus on the everyday lives of people and the politics of gender, religion, and colonial or imperial violence, especially in the Middle East and South

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1. Our project is culminating in a forthcoming 2023 book published by Duke University Press. This forum draws from a conversation hosted online by Nadje Al-Ali on February 25, 2022, at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. Laura Charney worked closely with us in developing and writing this contribution to *Feminist Studies*.

Asia (and where immigrants from these regions now live in the West), we were troubled by the ways some feminist visions and practices were being codified in state and foreign policies, international development, and humanitarian interventions.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, international support for women's rights coalesced around the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman. Two months after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Laura Bush announced that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."² American feminists and organizations such as the US-based Feminist Majority Foundation threw their support behind the invasion. Throughout the disastrous twenty-year military occupation of Afghanistan, cultural and religious violence against women was used to justify the presence of US troops on the ground while representations of gendered violence fueled Islamophobia at home and abroad.

The harnessing of a feminist agenda to legitimize military intervention in the name of protecting women seemed at the time an exceptional instance of political instrumentalism. Yet we continue to see religion invoked as a diagnosis of gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women (VAW). The agenda to combat these social ills has in fact become central to global security and governance. In this article, we use the acronym "GBVAW" to refer to this institutionalized agenda.

We wanted to bring together an interdisciplinary collective of feminist scholars with deep regional knowledges and critical perspectives on imperial politics to think together about the implications of the mainstreaming of a feminist agenda. How does the agenda to combat gender violence play itself out in cases brought to the International Criminal Court, or in humanitarian intervention in Gaza? How has Hindu nationalism encouraged gendered violence in India? How is the international campaign against child marriage displacing other women's rights issues in Bangladesh? Why are Iranian queer and trans asylum seekers in Turkey forced to perform expected scripts about their sexuality and to frame their complex experiences in Iran as torture? Why are some feminist organizations clamoring for inclusion in campaigns to counter violent

2. Laura Bush, "The Taliban's War Against Women," radio address to the nation, November 17, 2001, Crawford, TX, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/drl/rls/rm/2001/6206.htm>.

extremism? Because mass media disseminates representations of gender violence that become popular “common sense,” we invited journalists to join us. They analyzed representations of female genital cutting in the West and the editorial impulse to homogenize and sensationalize women and girls’ experiences of violence as in the case of the Yazidis in Iraq and Syria and the Chibok school girls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

We see ourselves in a lineage of scholars, journalists, and activists concerned about feminism’s inclusion in the halls of power, what Janet Halley and her colleagues have called governance feminism.³ *Feminist Studies* has consistently published works that complicate understandings of gender violence and analyze it in relation to multiple systems of power and other forces of violence. The post-9/11 era saw articles on feminism’s relationship to Orientalism and empire and on sexual violence. Jasbir K. Puar’s essay “Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism” argued that sexual control was intrinsic to American military conquest.⁴ In 2013, Poulami Roychowdhury’s article, “‘The Delhi Gang Rape’: The Making of International Causes,” analyzed the international media’s mobilization around sexual violence in India as a rallying cry.⁵ And the 2016 issue titled “Everyday Militarism” carried articles about the legacy of sexual abuse in the US military postings in South Korea, the history of women’s rights organizations in movements for women’s equality in the US military, and Nadera’s article, “Infiltrated Intimacies: The Case of Palestinian Returnees,” on the effects of Israel’s criminalization of Palestinian women returnees after their expulsion in the 1948 Nakba.⁶ *Feminist Studies* also included Lila’s conversation with Rabab El-Mahdi about the gendered

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3. Janet Halley, “Preface: Introducing Governance Feminism,” in Janet Halley, Prabha Kotiswaran, Rachel Rebouché, and Hila Shamir, *Governance Feminism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), ix–xx.
 4. Jasbir K. Puar, “Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 522–34.
 5. Poulami Roychowdhury, “‘The Delhi Gang Rape’: The Making of International Causes,” *Feminist Studies*, 39, no. 1 (2013): 282–92.
 6. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Infiltrated Intimacies: The Case of Palestinian Returnees,” *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 166–93. This special issue, “Everyday Militarism,” 42, no. 1 (2016), includes You-me Park’s “The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea: 17–40; and Elizabeth Mesok’s “Sexual Violence and the US Military: Feminism, US Empire, and the Failure of Liberal Equality”: 41–69.

orientalism of international coverage of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and the limited appeal women's rights discourse had to many Egyptian women involved in struggles for democracy and economic justice.⁷

These studies touched on some core issues that we covered in our collective project but did not interrogate how prevailing assumptions and technologies for treating gender violence might be affirming or sustaining dominant rationales of power. The case studies in our volume show how efforts to combat gender violence have become integral to border control, states' legitimacy, securitization regimes, and surveillance technologies. By focusing on the Middle East and South Asia as analytical sites, we had to come to terms with the ways that religion and racialized ethnicity, particularly "the Muslim question," run deeply through the international governance structures dedicated to combating gender-based violence and violence against women (GBV and VAW). By privileging the insights and political contexts of the kinds of individuals these programs purport to protect, we pushed against monolithic rubrics of victimhood and uncovered frictions within the mainstream agenda.

CONVERGING ON A PROJECT

The three of us (Lila, Rema, and Nadera), who convened and then carried this project through to a final publication, come from different backgrounds and have different relations to feminist scholarship and activism.⁸ Of the many scholars, journalists, and activists who joined us for workshops in New York and at Columbia University's Global Center in Amman, focusing on different dimensions of "Religion and the Global Framing of Gender Violence," each brought something distinct to the conversation.⁹

Nadera came to her concerns about gendered violence through her training as a clinical social worker and her activism as a critical decolonial criminologist living in the old city of Jerusalem, working closely

7. Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi, "Beyond the 'Woman Question' in the Egyptian Revolution," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 683–91.

8. Janet Jakobsen was a co-convenor and contributor to the project, but circumstances prevented her from being able to travel or coedit the book that resulted.

9. The project was supported by the Henry Luce Foundation's Initiative on Religion in International Affairs under the visionary leadership of Toby Alice Volkman. For more on the project and participants, see <https://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu/projects-/religion-and-the-global-framing-of-gender-violence>.

with survivors. Her work as the director of the first hotline in Palestine at the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling in 1993–94 exposed her not only to the physical and psychosocial pain caused by violence, but the political maneuvering that produced epistemic violence as well. This violence was most obvious in the racialized politics of categorizing abuses and the selective funding made available. Her academic work exposed “evidence-based” methods as racialized and showed how concepts such as “hot spots of criminality” were mobilized to justify the infliction of state violence. Her first encounters were with Palestinian schoolgirls who were interrogated in Israeli police stations and sexually abused and harassed by Israeli soldiers. She observed over the years how UN bureaucrats, international NGOs, aid workers, private security companies, human rights lawyers, and high-level governance experts worked together to develop mechanisms of control, demonizing Palestinian women and men as terrorists. Local and international governance, laws, and interventions operated as tools of domination in the hands of the settler colonial state.

As a clinician, social worker, and feminist activist, Nadera was exposed to the extent of violence against women and the ways it was sometimes concealed and other times made hypervisible. She started writing about politics (and biopolitics: Who gets to be a citizen or resident? Who gets to have an ID?), religious claims, state ideology, and psychogeography as gendered machineries of governance and control. The language of “caring for,” “helping,” “protecting,” and “supporting” women who are “backward” in terms of their religion or culture pathologized Palestinian women and masked the ways their troubles were related to structural and historical injustices. Living with, witnessing, and learning from those affected by settler colonial violence taught her how to think about gender violence in relation to state criminality.

Although also based in Palestine, Rema's concerns emerged from her institutional location at the Institute of Women's Studies (IWS) at Birzeit University in the occupied West Bank. She and her colleagues at IWS, which was founded just prior to the Oslo Accords in the mid-1990s, found themselves on the frontline of whatever was the latest gender agenda being promoted by the flood of global agencies and donors that arrived for the state/peace-building moment. She and her colleagues grappled with the transformations of Palestinian women's vibrant home-grown activism, rooted in local concerns, under the powerful forces of these global actors and imperatives. Initially, while the so-called

“peace process” lurched forward, the terms of these global frames were “gender mainstreaming,” “good governance,” and “empowerment.” Once it imploded and the state-building project collapsed, international agencies suddenly switched to plying the global agenda to address violence against women. From the location of IWS, these moves did not appear innocent: selective concerns around gender had become codified into instruments of geopolitical power and their changing rationales.

Yet even within the larger context of a problematic take-up of gender issues into global governance, the power of the anti-violence agenda in occupied Palestine has been unparalleled. It has remained the hegemonic global agenda for more than fifteen years, with all other gender concerns (e.g., legal reform, economic empowerment) now framed by its language and tethered to its goals. Along with her colleagues, Rema felt increasingly uncomfortable with the representations of gender relations in Palestinian society that were being produced to justify the need for interventions. Male violence against women in the family was assumed to be rampant, socially pervasive, and condoned (even by women). Although domestic violence exists in Palestine, as it does everywhere, these claims, including about the scale of the problem (with findings that the majority of Palestinian women were victims of domestic abuse) simply did not ring true. Among the multiple interventions that IWS faculty made to raise critical concerns about the politics of VAW, Rema took on the global statistical frames that produced the “evidence base” for Palestine’s rampant domestic violence problem. She uncovered how the normative “best practice” frames for measuring VAW in Third World contexts were designed to produce maximum prevalence rates of domestic abuse. These metrics are never used in countries in the Global North, where, instead, the normative measurement methods, such as crime victimization surveys, are structurally unlikely to produce high prevalence levels. The outcomes (high or low levels of VAW) are epistemologically built into the frameworks.

Tracing the roots of this “statistical apartheid”¹⁰ led her to the early history of the global anti-VAW agenda and the missing thread of this

10. Rema Hammami, “Follow the Numbers: Global Governmentality and the VAW Agenda in Occupied Palestine,” in *Governance Feminism: Notes from the Field*, ed. Janet Halley, Prabha Kotiswaran, Rachel Rebouché, and Hila Shamir (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 479–504.

“feminist success story”: along with getting international institutions to adopt VAW as a pressing issue of global governance was a project to ensure the adoption of these feminist “best practice frames” for measuring it in Global South. In short, Rema came to the issue of what we have come to call GBVAW (for reasons to be explained below) by being at the receiving end of its geopolitical history, experiencing how it unfurled on the ground as a powerful normative agenda promoted by international agencies in Palestine.

Lila’s perspective was different. As an anthropologist and ethnographer of rural communities in Egypt, she had encountered little gender-based violence and none of the urban activists or international agencies seeking to save women from it. In the 1990s when she studied popular television dramas in Egypt, she witnessed the prejudices that urban and educated elites in the television industry held toward the kinds of communities in which she had spent time. Feminist TV writers, like their NGO counterparts, saw rural women as subject to cultural violence and in need of empowerment. What frustrated her was that they did not appreciate the multiple systems in place for these women to assert their rights when they were wronged, nor did they note that, despite frustrations, most women were proud of the morality of their families and social systems. The violence that women in these communities tended to highlight had its sources beyond the domestic or familial, in the devastating economic policies that impoverished them and their families or the violent surveillance of the state and its security apparatus.

But after 9/11, when the United States and allies invaded Afghanistan, Lila was appalled at the way the plight of women in Afghanistan under Taliban violence was used as an “alibi,” as Gayatri Spivak put it, for a military invasion.¹¹ This led her to a new kind of work. Her next book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, addressed these issues through a back-and-forth between ethnography of women’s everyday lives in Egypt and critical analysis of Euro-American representations of Muslim women.¹² Around this period, the horrors of the “honor crime” became big news in feminist circles and even in US foreign policy — high-profile memoirs

11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Terror: A Speech After 9–11,” *boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 81–111.

12. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013)

of honor crimes turned out to be hoaxes, Ayaan Hirsi Ali set up a foundation to combat it, and, later, President Trump's Executive Order for the "Muslim Ban" in 2017 cited the honor crime as a reason to exclude or surveil Muslim men. The "incitement to discourse" on this particular cultural form of gender violence worked to stigmatize Muslim men, whether of the Middle East or South Asia. She contributed her critical scholarship on the "honor crime" to a Supreme Court case against President Trump.¹³ The circulation of politically motivated public discourse in the United States and Europe led her to want to work on the subject of gender violence. Coming together with our intersecting backgrounds, whether through Lila's attentive anthropological work and what she ended up discovering as securofeminism or Rema's and Nadera's work on international governance feminism and activism, we engaged with each other and those we sought out to join us in exploring these issues, listening carefully and learning from each other's commitments and analyses.

PARSING GENDER/VIOLENCE

We emerged from the project with three strategies for rethinking the relation between the myriad forms and experiences of gender violence and the problematic racialized codification of the feminist agenda to combat violence. First, we made a distinction between small-g gender violence and what we call GBVAW, which we use in this essay to refer to the institutionalized agenda and apparatus for addressing gendered violence. Second, we found the Hegelian concept of "cunning" productive in capturing the ways a well-meaning and visionary feminist commitment to end (or address) all forms of gendered violence got folded into world affairs. And lastly, we found it analytically helpful to parse the major circuits of power along which GBVAW travels.

The political framing and fusing of violence against women (VAW), and later, gender-based violence (GBV), as governance categories that now claim to represent once-marginalized feminist concerns around women's bodily integrity have produced them as elements of a powerful normative agenda within institutions of global governance. Violations of women's bodily integrity are now addressed by numerous Security Council

13. *Universal Muslim Association of America v. Trump*, Case 1:17-cv-00537 (U.S. District Court for D.C., 2017).

resolutions (famously starting with UN 1325); raised at the International Criminal Court in the Hague (as in sexual violence in war); integrated into global development imperatives (such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals); made a central concern in contexts of humanitarian intervention; and encoded in protocols and conventions at the core of both the global refugee and human trafficking regimes. They are recurrently asserted and invoked as a global security issue (as in the “Hillary Doctrine”) and in the most recent iteration tethered to the anti-terrorism agenda of combatting “violent extremism.”

In other words, what started more than thirty years ago as a radical feminist agenda is now a powerful set of norms and instruments integrated across multiple arenas and forms of global governance that have made addressing gender violence imperative for this huge range of institutional actors; they have provided them practical protocols, modalities, and procedures through which to do so. We use the unwieldy term GBVAW to represent this power-knowledge formation that brings together selective issues around bodily integrity and their interpolation into technologies of contemporary global governance and securitization. GBVAW operates as an apparatus, an assemblage, and a technology of governance — indeed, all of these. The power of GBVAW comes from locking onto ruling apparatuses and translating itself into their political rationales and modalities. Traveling with these various governmental bedfellows, GBVAW produces changing “reigning objects,” such as sexual GBV in war, child marriage, honor crimes, human trafficking, sexual slavery, and domestic violence. In the process, it highlights certain categories of perpetrators and victims while ignoring others with the result that civilizational binaries and racialized tropes are amplified.

We make a distinction between GBVAW, as a codified apparatus of global governance, and gender violence, a necessary feminist political category that speaks to the lived realities of violence and hierarchies in gender relations as these intersect with other forms of oppression. We use this broad definition of “gender violence” to avoid doing exactly what we’re critiquing — fixing frames and mobilizing exclusionary terms and concepts to address a complex range of human experiences of harm and their links to gender. Both “gender” and “violence” are notoriously slippery terms, but that is what makes them politically generative analytical concepts that help us recognize how experiences of violence and their

intersection with gender are context-specific and variable. Moreover, this variability allows us to examine how situated movements and activists struggling for justice may have different readings and priorities of what gender and violence might include or mean. Separating out GBVAW as a category of its own as well as part of a power/knowledge formation — distinct from gender violence — is a way to say no to its reified institutionalized meanings in the global agenda to address, criminalize, or otherwise combat violence.

The second concept that came to organize our thinking about the GBVAW apparatus was the Hegelian concept of cunning, which captured so much of what the diverse case studies our collective brought to the table: how the prevailing assumptions and technologies of GBVAW might be affirming, enabling, or sustaining rationales and systems of power that are harmful and at odds with the intents of the feminists who pushed for them. Here we followed the leads of Elizabeth Povinelli, whose book *The Cunning of Recognition* focused on the double binds imposed on Indigenous people in Australia by the apparently benign liberal multicultural policies of recognition, and Nancy Fraser who puzzled over “the disturbing convergence” between some of Second Wave feminism’s ideals and the demands of an emerging new logic of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, and neoliberal.¹⁴ Povinelli and Fraser use “cunning” to highlight how marginalized groups’ demands for justice become entrapped by the politics of inclusion. When institutions of power ostensibly embrace calls for social redress — in this case, anti-violence campaigns — they tend to do so in ways inimical to the original demands, as well as oblivious to the needs of those who made them.

Take, for example, the awarding of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to Nadia Murad, a young Yazidi woman and survivor of sexual violence in Iraq and the Congolese gynecologist, Denis Mukwege (both commended for campaigning against rape and sexual assault as a weapon of war), as well the responsiveness of the UN Security Council the following year to the pleas of Yazidi women survivors — when they passed another Resolution condemning sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in war

14. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (March/April 2009): 97–117.

and conflict.¹⁵ The award, along with the Security Council Resolution, appeared to signal a momentous shift in public consciousness and attitudes — attesting to the success of feminist efforts to produce a global consensus condemning the horrors of sexual and gender-based violence. While the prize rightly recognized the personal and political courage of these two activists, the “cunning” lies in how the act of recognition works to confirm a regime of truth deeply at odds with what the award appears to validate. Here, recognition implicitly pulls together and consolidates a series of deeper truth claims around race, gender, and violence: violence and its perpetrators are located in savage, racialized, distant places; victims suffer from the singular violence of bodily violation.¹⁶ The liberal West, in the form of its invading troops and peacekeepers, are the elect agents for their protection and rescue. The “international community,” with all the violence and destruction its interventions entail, is rendered innocent of any role in producing the conditions for or sustaining these conflicts and the violence women suffer.

The feminist achievement of getting international governance institutions to finally acknowledge violence against women within their mandates has been attained at the price of singling out the highly emotive issue of sexual violence in war as the major focus of UN conventions, protocols, resources, and interventions. The negative ramifications have been manifold for those seeking redress from violence (gendered or not) as well as for those who seek an end to war and armed conflict altogether, even while the category has been productive for imperial interventions, resource flows, and employment opportunities for experts. Ethnographic studies charting humanitarian interventions around what has come to be labeled SGBV on the ground show how often they are at odds with the dire needs and survival priorities of the victims and their communities.

Too often, we came to see, interventions in the name of GBVAW translate into exclusions and violences for those they purport to protect. Feminists who continue to advocate for inclusion dismiss its assimilation into racialized politics and imperial projects as unfortunate baggage. We began to worry that these dynamics are not *external* to the ways GBVAW

15. UN Security Council, Resolution 2467, S/RES/2467 (April 23, 2019).

16. See also Karen Engle, *The Grip of Sexual Violence in Conflict: Feminist Interventions in International Law* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

as governance operates, but rather may be integral to the implementation of the global agenda.

Finally, as the project developed and our cases multiplied, we began to see wider patterns. GBVAW traversed distinct (if connected) circuits of power with different effects on the ground. We identified and followed four key circuits of power to which the institutionalized feminist agenda has attached itself: (1) the global security world order and the convergence of feminist causes with securitization politics through developments in international legal instruments; (2) states and state institutions that themselves perpetrate gendered violence, often with impunity; (3) the “civilizational industries” that intervene in other parts of the world in the name of humanitarianism or capitalist development; and (4) mass media, whose gatekeeping and representations enforce the “common sense” that supports these interventions. We were struck by the ways that situated activists, individuals, and communities struggled against being forced into certain molds. Alternative visions, including those of other feminist activists outside these structures of power, were silenced, sidelined, ignored, or prevented from working because they did not conform to the liberal or carceral forms of the “feminist GBVAW” agenda tied into these circuits of power and governance.

ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES?

The question remains: what alternatives might there be to GBVAW? We have no single answer. Each of our book’s contributors offers alternatives based on the specific contexts and situations they analyze — whether for women activists in Pakistan or Bangladesh or scholars and citizens concerned about anti-Muslim politics in Modi’s India; for a former prisoner trying to explain fellow political prisoners’ fears of rape in Iran to legal scholars, journalists, and anthropologists worried about media coverage of sexual and gender violence or the legal and political discourses within the United States, Europe, or international institutions that the media echo.

Rema saw a critical irony in the GBVAW approach to alleviating gender violence. The Euro-American battered women’s movement that arose in the 1970s and was the precursor for the broader global feminist GBVAW agenda developed an ethical protocol for a victim-centered approach for dealing with women who suffered violence. They argued for respecting the agency of victims of gender violence and putting them

in charge of their experience—both in terms of how it should be read and understood and in terms of what interventions they preferred. However, when it came to the deployments of GBVAW, agency was removed from local activists and, with it, survivors' ability to make their own decisions. The naming of the violence, its causes, treatments, and everything else are predetermined by global norms, techniques, and definitions. The only agents are the international agencies themselves. Both the nature of the problem and solutions to it are hashed out at myriad UN meetings involving "experts" and in feminist think tanks in the Global North. This generates a power relation that is akin to what the battered women's movement would call "re-victimization."

The issue of feminist popular sovereignty is at the heart of what Rema suggests needs to change. What is needed is a shift outward and downward to what we might call the marginalized center: the contexts of GBVAW's actual operations and where its effects are felt. Let local activists, frontline workers, and victims of gender violence decide what the problem is, choose what language should be used to describe it, and determine the solutions. This would mean dealing with the politics of care in terms of offering "care" for victims of gender violence that is actually responsive to their needs, rather than working with pre-packaged GBVAW "global best practices." This includes asking whether addressing gender violence is even their highest priority. In Gaza, most women prioritized ending Israeli siege and military violence as the most tangible and urgent form of care. In other cases, removing state impunity for racialized or ethnicized violence, or recognizing the material hardships caused by siege, citizenship laws, inadequate funding in refugee camps, and border controls might be most crucial.

Relatedly, there are claims to political representation that enable GBVAW operations to keep going forward. The whole army of UN GBVAW experts and allied feminist think tanks, NGOs, and academics involved in the production and circulation of GBVAW as the main approach to anti-violence base their purported representation of women and queer individuals on their credentials and feminist expertise, rather than on a foundation of democratic politics. Could it be that the systems propelling this kind of expertise forward favor legible forms of power, such as those used by hegemonic states and international institutions? Instead

of feminist sovereigns, Rema suggests that we need feminist sovereignty, and the opening up to other existing forms of feminist activism.

Nadera's location led her to focus on state violence and the ways the global GBVAW apparatus chooses to not address it. Noting that in many contexts gendered violence is central to state-making and sustaining state power, she offers the concept of state crime as crucial to challenging the GBVAW agenda.¹⁷ This would enable feminists to point out how state violence is meted out along gendered lines and to recognize the violence of state institutions and the law, drawing from Indigenous conceptualizations of justice beyond the necro-capitalist state. Gendered violence committed by states is cunning: it can work through humanitarian registers of concern, protection, and biopolitical care. It can extend to men and boys of minoritized groups as well as to sexual minorities. It can subtend authoritarian or necropolitical projects of exclusion and expulsion, and it is intensified under colonial conditions, during wars, or after natural disasters.

Those walking the halls of power risk legitimizing the coercive power wielded by states against their own marginalized, Othered, colonized, and racialized individuals and communities, just as GBVAW, as we have shown, risks affirming geopolitical civilizational hierarchies. Nadera's encounter with representatives of a major European donor at a local community center she works with in occupied East Jerusalem brought home to her these problems. The community center had prepared for the visit with sessions consisting of children, youth, women, and men sharing stories of their personal hardships, including child incarceration, house arrests, histories of displacement, eviction orders, housing demolitions, daily wounding and loss of loved ones. Women and men from the community had worked hand in hand to prepare lunch and to entertain the representatives of the donor organization with Palestinian music and dance, alongside the sharing of their ordeals, their pain, and their collective acts of continuity. At the end of the long day, the representatives of the funding group told them that what they really needed to know was what the community center was doing about violence against women. "This is a pathology that you can't deny . . . how do you deal with

17. Kamala Visweswaran, ed., *Everyday Occupations: Experiencing Militarism in South Asia and the Middle East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

violent men?” Deaf to what girls and women had been saying about the state, the settlers’ violence against them, and their gendered modes of resistance, these representatives failed to see the vibrancy of the center in its refusal to accept violence as normal. A lead member of the community center looked across at Nadera with fear (of losing funding) and texted her: “Isn’t everything we do against violence?” If those working against gender violence could be more aware of where they stand and speak from, as well as of the language they use, they might avoid having their interventions serve as another force for erasure.

There is plenty of criticism from within about the failure of GBVAW to deliver an end to gender violence. There is no question that a diverse set of feminist thinkers and activists have worked hard, over decades and in good faith, with the aim of addressing and condemning gendered violence. The mainstreaming of GBVAW as the instrument for working against gender violence has been especially disappointing to those who lament the watering down of feminist aspirations and emancipatory visions as a necessary compromise to gain traction for their struggle to confront the scourge of gendered violence, from domestic abuse to sexual violence in war. Janet Halley has identified what she calls the “five c’s” that alignments with power risk or entail: collaboration, compromise, collusion, complicity, and co-optation.¹⁸

Should feminists continue to engage with GBVAW’s institutional circuits? This is often presented as a choice between being at the table to draw attention to gender justice demands or being excluded and thus being unable to affect policy. One of the most thoughtful legal scholars making this argument is Fionnuala Ní Aoláin who said of her work with the Security Council and counterterrorism: “To remain outside is to forfeit the possibility of exercising any influence on the decisions and actions that affect the lives of millions of women and girls across the globe living through situations of extremity and violence.”¹⁹ What these calculations miss, we suggest, is a reading of the nature of power wielded by these hegemonic institutions and the price of inclusion.

18. Halley, “Preface: Introducing Governance Feminism,” xv.

19. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “The ‘War on Terror’ and Extremism: Assessing the Relevance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 2 (2016): 278.

This became a pressing question for Lila who had become alarmed by feminist engagements over the last decade in the soft branch of counterterrorism known as “countering violent extremism.” She gave the name “securofeminists” to those who embraced this enterprise. The involvement in the global security apparatus presents the same problems Vasuki Nesiah identified in *International Conflict Feminism*.²⁰ Violent extremism is an “empty signifier,” like its partner term “radicalization,” as Nadia Fadil and her colleagues, Martijn de Koning, and Francesco Ragazzi, have argued.²¹ Its deployment reduces complex political and historical dynamics to simple problems with pat solutions. It depoliticizes and decontextualizes violence while dehumanizing certain racialized groups or communities. For example, is only the violence that is carried out in the name of a particular religious ideology or a group on the US terror list to be called extremist? Why wouldn’t the extreme violence of the “shock and awe” military campaigns carried out by powerful armies, bombers, drones, and proxy militias fall under this label, when its effects on people of all genders are truly catastrophic?

The gendered lens of feminism is crucial but it must be wide-angled. Proposals for protecting women from “extremists” rarely recommend that security states change course, pursue political rather than military solutions to conflicts, ban global arms production and sales, halt support for violent allies or proxies, or seek ways to limit devastating destruction, injury, deprivation, and death. Security-speak cannot include what the Watson Institute’s Costs of War Project calculates as the cost of the twenty-first-century wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They measure the costs not just in weapons and death tolls but in alternative ways such funds could have been spent — on education, health, and welfare.²²

These are all core feminist issues, and many critical feminists have thought and continue to think about and work on them. The urgent

20. Vasuki Nesiah, “Feminism as Counter-Terrorism: The Seduction of Power,” in *Gender, National Security, and Counter-Terrorism: Human Rights Perspectives*, ed. Margaret L. Satterhwaite and Jayne Huckerby (London: Routledge) 127–51.

21. Nadia Fadil, Martijn de Koning, and Francesco Ragazzi, eds., *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

22. “Costs of War,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar>.

question we face with the GBVAW apparatus and its definitions of the problem is this: What should feminist politics be working for and what should we work against?