

#MeToo in the Global South: Reflections on a Viral Movement

by Iqra Shagufta Cheema and Jennifer Jill Fellows

This is a revised version of an interview with Dr. Iqra Shagufta Cheema that aired on the podcast *Cyborg Goddess* on June 7, 2024.¹ Iqra Shagufta Cheema is an assistant professor of humanities at Graceland University in Iowa. She is a scholar and teacher of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary and media studies of the global majority, feminist film studies, and transnational feminisms. In this interview, Dr. Cheema discusses her book, *The Other #MeToos* (Oxford University Press 2023), with Dr. Jennifer Jill Fellows. *The Other #MeToos* is an edited volume that brings together sixteen scholars of media, linguistics, gender, law, literary studies, postcolonial studies, and Indigenous studies to examine how the Global South countries and communities engage with the #MeToo movement and how this translation of #MeToo changes the feminist politics and publics.

Jennifer Jill Fellows: Can you tell me what motivated you to take on this book project?

Iqra Shagufta Cheema: In 2017, when Alyssa Milano's tweet went viral,² I closely followed the #MeToo movement. While academic discussions about #MeToo occurred in the West afterwards, there was little critical attention to the movement's transnational impact or how feminists in the Global South experienced the transnational diffusion of the #MeToo and how it was shaping Global South feminist politics and publics. I also noticed that global attention to #MeToo and other related issues was often limited to certain days, like Women's Day. I specifically remember a *Washington Post* photo essay that featured Women's Marches from around the world. The photos in this essay, which had images from Women's Marches from countries such as Iran, France, India, and Pakistan, were striking to me considering the contestation around even a single issue like women's choice to cover their heads amid the rising Islamophobia.

The fact that Women's March had room for all these women, or that women whose feminisms *looked* so different yet was tied to same right of choice, was interesting. This prompted me to read scholarly works on the global #MeToo movement, such as *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* by Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes and *The Global #MeToo Movement* by Ann Noel and David Oppenheimer. More books such as *Reporting on Sexual Violence in the #MeToo Era* which was edited by Andrea Baker and Usha Rodrigues came out while I was putting together *The Other #MeToos*. While such works were informative, they underscored the need for a more comprehensive, expansive exploration of the movement's impact beyond the West. Following Toni Morrison's advice to write the book you want to read, I decided to start *The Other #MeToos*.

JJF: The book is expansive, covering the #MeToo movement across various locations and cultures globally. There are chapters on Indigenous communities and on the movement's presence in Morocco, Pakistan, India, South Korea, Egypt, and the Czech Republic, among others. While this interview can't fully capture the breadth of material in the book, I'd like to discuss some of the recurring themes and a few chapters. Before that, could you briefly explain what transnational feminism is for those unfamiliar with the concept?

ISC: To answer this, I will go back to the evolution of the term itself to define transnational feminism and its shifts

against and in comparison with other dominant feminist terms. The term goes back to initial contentions between white feminism and feminisms of color as articulated in the scholarship by Ranjoo Herr, Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Jacqui Alexander. Recognizing the implicit racism and homogenization of women's lived experiences, some white feminists started using the term global feminism and international feminism as these terms could be more inclusive and expansive.

However, unlike international feminism, global feminism advocated for transcending national borders, which is a thorny subject given the geopolitical histories of the Global North and Global South. It's irresponsible and inaccurate to ignore the formation of national borders and role of border regimes when thinking in the shadow of imperial global histories. Compared to global feminism, international feminism presupposed nation states as "discrete and sovereign entities," which is also a thorny position to take as we see in Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal's work.

To account for the geopolitical situatedness of women's experiences, feminists like Kumari Jayawardena and Chandra Mohanty, among others, argue for Third World feminism to geopolitically historicize the Third World women's experiences to examine their agency and diverse forms of their activism. However, transnational feminism then replaced or subsumed Third World feminism and is now the more familiar and more widely used term, as laid out in Amanda Swarr and Richa Nagar's work, *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, along with Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, and Jacqui Alexander's work. Overall, transnational feminism challenges the assumption of homogeneity, both of women and their experiences, and also challenges conception of global sisterhood to emphasize the heterogeneity of women's experiences and activism, as did Third World feminism. But it focuses more on the cross-national rather than national feminist organizing and networks.

This is not to say that all transnational feminists articulate these ideas similarly. Their methodologies do differ. For example, Grewal and Kaplan focus more on a culturist transnationalism where nations as analytical frames are less relevant. Mohanty and Alexander, on the other hand, emphasize geopolitical and national histories. However, it's important here to note that Mohanty in her 1984 seminal essay, "Under Western Eyes" wrote about third world women as a third world feminist. However, in her 2003 "Under Western Eyes Revisited," she revisits her previous position as a third world feminist to reposition herself as an "anticapitalist transnational feminist." She believes a "transnational, anticapitalist feminist critique" is a more suitable methodology to focus on the interplay of globalization and capitalism as it "historical materialism and centralizes racialized gender." Overall, transnational feminism examines gendered epistemic privilege, intersectionality, deleterious effects of global capitalism, and the politics of international feminist solidarity. In doing so, it aspires to historicize, situate, and examine gendered relations and their formation in cross-border global, racial, colonial, and imperial contexts with less attention to the nation-states.

JJF: Now that we have outlined the conceptual tool of transnational feminism, can you tell us about the origins of the #MeToo movement and how the movement became a viral online feminist phenomenon?

ISC: Most people witnessed the #MeToo movement going viral in 2017 with Alyssa Milano's tweet. But after Milano's tweet, it emerged that this was not a new movement. The "Me Too" movement, with the same goals, had been started by Tanara Burke in 2006 on MySpace. Milano's tweet helped to make the movement international and viral, both because of her celebrity status and because social media and its access has changed considerably since 2006. Upon learning of Burke's Me Too movement, Milano acknowledged Burke's contribution. Burke also accepted Milano's role in leading the #MeToo movement.

Despite their recognition of each other's work, questions about the politics of solidarity come into play here: Milano's tweet received responses from celebrities like Lady Gaga and Jennifer Lawrence; Burke only got credit for her work after Black feminists and other allies advocated for her and amplified the work she had been doing since 2006.

We can credit different sociopolitical shifts like broader cultural acceptance of feminist politics, increased international recognition for the need for feminist justice, awareness about intersectional feminism, and availability of feminist vocabularies for the virality of 2017 campaign. But at the same time, we can also think about the politics of

white feminism at play in instances like this. Burke, in her interview with *Ebony*, commented that discrediting her work was perhaps unintentional but somehow sisters of color manage to “get diminished or erased in these situations.”³

Burke’s Me Too imagines an international sisterhood of Black, Indigenous, and people-of-colour survivors under the assumption that all of these survivors are equal and equally deserving of justice, which is something that often gets erased when it comes to white feminisms. But despite these issues, #MeToo continues to be a massively successful feminist movement in our times. Between October and November 2017, the hashtags #MeToo and #WomensMarch were tweeted more than 2.3 million and 11.5 million times respectively, in multiple Indigenous and national languages worldwide. It is this grassroots appeal of the movement that made it successful. It is the participation of the masses in the movement that made it into what it is. But, in times of crises, solidarity is extended conditionally and selectively to women of color, as we witness in the feminist responses and feminist engagement with Palestine. This points to the limits of transnational feminist movements like #MeToo.

JJF: That points to a tension that we’ll draw out more in this conversation. A lot of people, myself included, did not know about the #MeToo movement until 2017. Part of that might have been because I was never on MySpace. But part of it is probably also because of my social location as a white feminist living in Canada which definitely shapes what I have regular access to and see, and what I don’t. So it’s really important to think about the way in which technologies and social media platforms like Twitter and MySpace work—and also whose voices are being amplified on which platforms.

ISC: Right. With the American tech hegemony, it’s critical to pay attention to whose voices are amplified, silenced, restricted, or shadow banned in many ways that we sometimes witness—and most of the time don’t witness or only learn about retrospectively. But overall, at least #MeToo became the integrative site where both Burke and Milano could come together because they had one shared goal. This shows us that solidarity is possible, when one is willing to acknowledge and work through the challenges and contradictions of the process.

JJF: A recurring theme in the book is that the #MeToo movement is often viewed as a white, Western brand of feminism, extending colonial or Western influence, especially in different contexts. This perception leads to the movement being seen as dangerous and supporters of it as threatening. Can you discuss how this manifests?

ISC: This aligns with general synonymy of feminism with white feminism, particularly in post-colonial contexts, where many nationalists view feminism with suspicion, equate it with imperialism, or misperceive it as Western agenda. The term carries colonial and imperial baggage. It has been instrumentalized and offered for imperialist and settler designs. We see in feminists like Gloria Steinem, Eve Ensler, Meryl Streep, and Susan Sarandon’s active support for War on Terror,⁴ which Rafia Zakaria describes as America’s first feminist war.

Unsurprisingly, these histories of white feminists or Western feminists undermine feminist praxis and complicate feminist theory. Rafia Zakaria’s book, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*, explains this discomfiture by examining the long histories of feminist development work as well as the relationship between white feminists and Third World feminists. White feminism, as soon as it touches borders with feminisms of colour, especially in or from the global majority countries and communities, tends to become relatively apolitical or politically myopic. Many liberal feminists remain unaware of these tendencies in their own work. The #MeToo movement, despite its limitations, has broadened the potential for more transnational models of solidarity through a hashtag, which supplements the traditional on-ground activism by offering wider accessibility and safety. This is not to prioritize one mode of political activism over the other but to say that they work best when mobilized simultaneously on the ground and online. People have been able to modify the hashtag #MeToo, adapt it, translate it in different ways, so it could be localized, while sustaining its transnational underpinnings. But feminist goals and objectives are heterogenous everywhere, across a variety of contexts. In the Global South, public visibility remains deeply political, as we see in movements like “Girl at Dhabas” in Pakistan and “Why Loiter?” in India. In contrast, in the West, visibility often aligns with neoliberal, capitalist aspirations rather than feminist politics. This divergence creates a more complex, sometimes re-

luctant, engagement with feminism in different parts of the world. #MeToo became the one central place or hashtag or referent for conversations about gendered and sexual violence, but it remains malleable enough to allow heterogeneity and difference.

JF: Throughout the book, there are chapters highlighting the ways communities have engaged with the global #MeToo movement to amplify voices and raise awareness about specific issues. Could you discuss the advantages some communities found in participating?

ISC: Absolutely. I received many remarkable essays for this collection, which also served as powerful teaching tools for me while I was planning the book. Several essays examine how local movements emerged from this global phenomenon. For instance, the #MosqueMeToo movement discusses how the sub-hashtag enabled Muslim women to share their experiences of sexual violence during Hajj. This created a transnational movement centered around a religious identity beyond national borders.

Zoe Eddy's chapter discusses Indigenous feminisms, highlighting how the #MeToo movement opened space for Indigenous survivors of gendered violence in North America. Eddy critiques the white-dominated narrative of #MeToo, while acknowledging how it provided a platform for Indigenous approaches to addressing sexual violence. In contrast, movements like #MosqueMeToo do not rely on Western engagement; instead, they focus on community issues, such as policy changes for Hajj. Here is an excerpt from the chapter, "Deer Women Dancing":

To an Indigenous survivor among a community of Indigenous survivors, #MeToo sometimes feels as though a bleeding wound has opened further. After all, Indigenous activists have long been seeking redress for the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people. A conversation with a friend epitomized my own sentiments. #MeToo is no secret in Indian country. It's literally a statistic. If you are looking at me and I am Native, then it's literally probable that, you know, #MeToo. Nevertheless, the popularization of Burke's movement among white feminists and their adjacent circles has created a re-entry point for Indigenous survivors.

These examples show how #MeToo has expanded to include diverse, localized movements—an alternative politics—that reflect the experiences and politics of the various communities.

JF: These two examples are really helpful. When we think about Indigenous movements, like #MMIW or #NoMoreStolenSisters, they existed independently of the 2017 #MeToo viral movement. In some of the chapters, one can read the frustration that the #MeToo movement has gone viral and many other online and offline activist movements have existed yet haven't gone viral in the West. But that this was both a frustration but also an opportunity, or a re-entry point. In contrast, #Mosque MeToo does not attempt to engage with mainstream Western audiences and media. While Indigenous movements use the #MeToo movement to leverage visibility, #MosqueMeToo uses #MeToo movement to build solidarity among Muslim women and does not try to get Western media to respond, to be involved at all. I think the malleability of the #MeToo movement is interesting.

ISC: Definitely. It takes us back to the question that you were asking earlier about the ways in which people engage with feminism. I would also clarify that Western feminism or white feminism is about a certain kind of imperialist politics and its methods, not about the skin color or geographical location.

It is critical for Indigenous movements to get engagement and attention from the Western mainstream media for any redressal, but that is not as necessary in the case of the #MosqueMeToo movement or #MeinBhi in Pakistan. Broader media coverage helps build pressure for resolution or policy changes, but redressal in the later cases can only come from within the community or the respective state.

There is another chapter in the book (the only one written by a man, Nicolás Juárez) called "Native Men Too: Settler Sexual Violence, Native Genocide, and a Dream of Fire." Juárez invites the readers' attention to "Native" men saying #MeToo, not to undermine women's experiences but to complicate the discourse on sexual violence and agency, spe-

cifically as they relate to gender and race. This is critical because, frequently, when people think of gender or sexual violence, the automatic victim that many people imagine is women, which is not always the case. Violence against men remains understudied and doesn't get the feminist or media attention that it should receive.

JJF: We've talked about the ways in which this movement, because of its malleability and its ability to adapt to local contexts, can be really powerful. But chapters in your book also look at the ways in which the #MeToo movement was not that helpful depending on what was going on locally? Can we talk about regions where the #MeToo movement just didn't seem to gain ground?

ISC: One chapter in the book talks about the #MeToo movement and its impact in Nepal. One chapter talks about Sri Lanka; another chapter talks about the #MeToo movement in Czech Republic. As you said, the impact of the #MeToo was different depending upon the local contexts and the different ways in which feminism has been vilified or valorized in different cultural and political contexts. One idea that recurs across the chapters is the discomfort with the term *feminism* itself and with its Western origins, which we discussed earlier.

JJF: Some chapters show that in some contexts online feminist movements were gaining ground and making a difference, possibly changing public policy or gaining solidarity and sisterhood. And as #MeToo swept around the globe, these movements were sometimes negatively affected by the perception that they were connected to #MeToo, perhaps because people had tweeted #MeToo along with the local hashtag. This led to the suspicion that this was a colonial, imperialist force rather than a local feminist movement. You mentioned the Czech Republic. I was fascinated by this chapter which describes how #MeToo movement was often viewed with suspicion as something akin to communism, which the Czech Republic has a history with. The #MeToo movement was therefore viewed with suspicion, as a trial of public opinion, moving away from law and order and fair trials, and also viewed as having Communist influences. In that way, the movement also gained suspicion and didn't gain ground. This came up in a few different chapters, though in different contexts, in different ways.

ISC: Right. Feminists have been mulling over this relationship between the local, national, and the international for a long time. Even thinking about the origin of the term transnational feminism or the move from Third World to transnational feminism is intriguing as we think about the geopolitical categorization of the world and its impact on political, social, and material conditions of life. This is a complexity that is impossible to flatten.

JJF: It is interesting that many activists felt the pressure to engage with this movement even though engaging with it was sometimes unhelpful. On the one hand, it is messy. On the other hand, it's the rich complexity of transnational feminism, right? We can't reduce it to something simple. And that's kind of the point. Reducing is erasing. We discussed this tension in the #MeToo movement where you feel like you have to engage in this international viral movement and also acknowledge the movement's American origins, which carries certain risks given the histories of white feminism and colonialism. I wonder if some of this tension in the #MeToo movement stems directly from the way the movement went viral.

In the preface of your book, you write: "Burke's #MeToo supports an international sisterhood of BIPOC survivors under the assumption that all survivors are equal. But famous #MeToo cases that went viral after Milano's tweet suggest that some survivors are more equal than others." It is also a theme in several chapters in your book that the movement gained a boost in certain contexts, often because of high profile, powerful, privileged people's involvement. The movement is very flexible but also risks silencing the very voices that are keeping it alive. Can we talk about this tension between finding international solidarity and amplifying voices versus the way the #MeToo movement went viral, which is a prioritizing of very privileged white Western feminist voices, and how that might complicate #MeToo?

ISC: Because so many of the #MeToo cases, inside and outside the United States, have been the celebrity cases. These high-profile cases, often involving celebrities, may share some experiences with the public but remain unique due to the power and positionality of those involved. This is despite the fact that the movement owes its success to everyone

who participated in it, tweeted it, and chose to share their personal experiences of #MeToo. This points to multiple concerns. For example, who can hope for justice in cases of sexual or gendered violence? How relatable or constructive are these discussions around celebrity cases, especially in culturally specific contexts? It also invites our attention to the contemporary “economy of attention”: who gets noticed and whose voices matter. A part of this dynamic might be the human desire to make heroes out of people or idolize them. One example is the way certain celebrities are made into feminist icons due to their work, even though their work remains apolitical as it merely employs the tropes and aesthetics of feminism without actualizing feminist politics. This often furthers structural violence and serves as a Band-Aid to hide the pervasiveness and urgency of a problem. However, this question is increasingly more critical for movements like #MeToo.

Endnotes

1. Permission to reprint this transcript was granted by the producer and host of *Cyborg Goddess*, Dr. Jennifer Jill Fellows, and by the podcast guest, Dr. Iqra Shagufta Cheema.
2. On Oct. 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano shared that one of her friends had suggested that “if all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘MeToo’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.’ Milano urged people to write ‘me too’ as a reply to her tweet. This came in the wake of accusations against Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein. Milano’s tweet quickly went viral, gaining millions of tweets. Read more: Anderson, Monica and Skye Toor. (2018). “How Social Media Users Have Discussed Sexual Harassment Since #MeToo Went Viral.” Pew Research Center, Oct. 11. www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/10/11/how-social-media-users-have-discussed-sexual-harassment-since-metoo-went-viral/
3. Zahara Hill. (2018). “A Black Woman Created the ‘Me Too’ Campaign against Sexual Assault 10 Years Ago.” *Ebony*. October 18. www.ebony.com/news/black-woman-me-too-movement-ariana-burke-alyssamilano/.
4. George W. Bush, “Rights and Aspirations of the People of Afghanistan.” White House Archives of President George W. Bush. georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/afghanistan/text/20040708.html.