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Vulnerability and empowerment on the ground: Activist perspectives from the global feminisms project

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Abstract

Vulnerability is a standard criterion used by state and non-governmental organizations to identify groups of people in need of protection or support. Over the past two decades, however, this notoriously ill-defined and potentially stigmatizing term has been subjected to scrutiny by researchers, service providers, and theorists across multiple disciplines. This study examines the relevance of *vulnerability* to the ways international feminist activists who were interviewed between 2003 and 2019 for the Global Feminisms Project (GFP) described their struggles for women's rights in various settings over the past 50 years. Citing examples from nine countries, we show that these activists rarely used the

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term *vulnerable*, and never to classify groups of people. Instead, they frequently explained how particular groups were subjected to precarious conditions, and how they resisted subjugation, within multiple layers of gendered social relations and political structures. Many activists connected their locally-grounded work to global historical processes, emphasizing particularly the impact of neo-liberalism. Although using different vocabularies, these analyses resonate with work by bioethicists and feminist/queer theorists who reject the use of vulnerability as a classificatory term but embrace it as a tool for analyzing subjugation, building solidarity, and challenging neo-liberal conceptions of individual autonomy.

Keywords
vulnerability, empowerment, human rights, feminist activism, transnational feminism

A recent news article published on the United Nations website (2021) features the image of a woman with dark skin carrying a baby. The anxious look on her face captures our gaze, evoking feelings of fear and uncertainty about what the future holds for the baby in her arms. Behind her, blurred, is what looks like a refugee camp and other children. The caption reads: "Progressively more acute droughts in Somalia have prompted people to move – undermining food security and leaving women *vulnerable* [emphasis added] to sexual exploitation." The UN's website depicts dozens of other black and brown feminized bodies, with children, often fleeing climate disaster, economic and sexual exploitation, violent conflict, repressive states, or any combination of these.

Vulnerable and *vulnerability* entered the lexicon of governmental and non-governmental human rights and health and social services organizations worldwide in the 1970s, quickly becoming standard terms used to identify groups or populations "in need of protection" and support. Mounting objections to unintended negative effects of labeling people as *vulnerable*, however, fueled an outpouring of scientific and scholarly research on its meanings and applications over the past 30 years. Our research examines the relevance and meaning of vulnerability as it appears in a collection of interviews of international feminist activists that were recorded from 2003–19 as part of the Global Feminisms Project (GFP). These diverse narratives of feminist practice, each grounded in a specific socio-historic context, contribute valuable data to scholarly debates that should influence how international policy-makers and human rights organizations define such terms.

One of the early interventions in these debates was Cynthia Enloe's (1989) widely read feminist analysis of international politics. Enloe demonstrated that the concept of vulnerability frequently conflates "womenandchildren," depicting women as "apolitical" and "non-agentic" victims (Enloe, 2014 [1989], p. 1). These "feminized and infantilized images of 'pure' victimhood and vulnerability" narrow the subjectivities available to women and girls into the present, especially in the Global South (Sigona, 2014, p. 370).

Controversy over the interpretation and application of the concept of vulnerability has escalated since Enloe's work was first published, as "respect for human vulnerability"

was increasingly incorporated as a fundamental bioethical principle guiding research, healthcare, and human rights advocacy around the world (ten Have, 2015; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006). Debate is especially prolific in the fields of public health and bioethics, where contributors largely agree that vulnerability has too often become a stigmatizing and exclusionary label but diverge on whether it should be abandoned or refined (ten Have, 2015). The US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (2020) recently included *vulnerable* among the terms that public health responders should avoid because it is "vague and implies that the condition is inherent to the group rather than the actual causal factors," and therefore "can be stigmatizing." Many scholars, however, argue that careful consideration of how vulnerability is produced relationally and contextually on multiple levels is crucial for ethical research and intervention aimed at combating stigma and inequality. This sort of analysis was notable, for example, in the early 2000s in Brazil, where it helped to shape progressive state policy to combat racial and gender inequality (Menicucci, 2013; Werneck, 2010). In a widely-cited 2009 publication, Argentine bioethicist Francesca Luna (2009) insists that misuse of vulnerability as a fixed label underscores the need for more attention to dynamic, layered processes that shape how people experience it. Other scholars suggest focusing on "precarity" or even "precaritization," rather than vulnerability, as a means of describing conditions and processes rather than the individuals who experience them (Butler et al., 2016, p. 8; Fine et al., 2016; Honkasalo, 2019, p. 7).

Within the field of psychology, similar debates over how to understand and address vulnerability have centered particularly on the concept of empowerment. In 1993, responding to the question, "[w]hat's wrong with empowerment?," feminist psychologist Stephanie Riger critiqued earlier notions of empowerment within the field, which emphasized individuals' own responsibility and capacity to free themselves from repression rather than pointing to the ways people are dependent on collectives and gain power from connections with others. About a decade later, Becker (2005) criticized feminist psychology for repeating the failure of mainstream psychology to address structural and systemic forces that affect how women gain (or are deprived of) power. Baker (2010) examines how the deployment of neoliberal market values into the realm of human lives intensified a "fascination with individuated selfhood" that socialized young women in Australia to believe they should be "self-reliant and transformative subjects," leaving little room for understanding failure as a product of the social structures that create systemic disadvantage (pp. 187, 200). More recently, Rutherford (2018) explained how brown and black women and girls became the idealized subjects of "empowerment development discourse," in which the white woman's access to mastery and control defines her as empowered, while "the racialized 'third world' girl … is constructed simultaneously and paradoxically both as the abject, helpless, 'other' in need of saving by white philanthropists, and as the potential driver of massive social and economic change" (pp. 624–5).

This discourse constructs the category of "empowered woman" in opposition to that of "vulnerable women and girls," without which it cannot exist. Mary Douglas's (1966) analysis of the symbolic meaning of dirt is a useful way to understand how social categories

are co-constructed, as Sandra Bem (1995) shows in her analysis of how the construction of heterosexuality as "pure" – clean and safe – depends on the construction of queer/homosexuality as dirty. Similarly, by framing racialized black or brown "Third World" girls/women as vulnerable victims, it is possible to view white women eager to assist them as already empowered subjects. Not only does this mutual construction preserve ideal womanhood for white women as strong, agentic, and superior, but it also creates contradictory images of racialized women and girls as both helpless victims and capable of empowering themselves only by developing those personal qualities stereotypically ascribed to white women.

Feminist psychologists have worked against individualistic and binary understandings of empowerment by analyzing women's vulnerability in the context of multi-layered power structures that produce patterns of domination and abuse. For example, in post-conflict communities in Africa, individualistic perspectives such as a post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis fail to capture how subjective experiences of trauma and vulnerability are shaped by "broader contextual (social, environmental, political, historical, economical etc.) aspects" (Segalo, 2015, p. 447). Segalo urges us to think about forms of community empowerment that focus on recognizing and changing structures by moving "from a discourse of 'protection' towards that of 'participation,' where those involved and affected become active players in determining what it means to be safe, and free" (2015, p. 453). Similarly, in Nicaragua, collective empowerment in the form of women's land ownership and participation in social organizations correlated with progressive gender ideology, women gaining power within relationships, and decreased gender-based violence (Grabe, 2012; Grabe et al., 2014).

When psychologists fail to identify structural and systemic inequities when working with groups that are underrepresented in their field, they often misattribute vulnerabilities to individual pathology or to culture (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015; Narayan, 1997). For Segalo (2015), "categorizing people's suffering simply as a manifestation of a clinical syndrome (PTSD) or as a culture-bound construction of reality dehistoricizes and dehumanizes their lived experiences" (p. 451). Although it is crucial to understand how particular cultural contexts shape psychological suffering, an exclusive emphasis on cultural oppression tends to place the burden of resistance on the individual rather than on collective action to change patriarchal state and social institutions (Rutherford, 2018). As Marecek (2012) warns, if we fail to recognize the embeddedness of discrete locales within Global North-South power relations, US psychology will reproduce itself elsewhere and individualistic explanations will become universals both within and outside the United States.

Transnational feminist psychology is faced with a paradox. On the one hand, we acknowledge structural global inequities, the vulnerabilities these inequities create, and the need to set universal standards for women's well-being. On the other, the debate about creating universal standards is charged with the potential reproduction of unequal power relations between the Global North and South. A growing body of literature within feminist and queer theory suggests that we can think beyond this paradox by understanding vulnerability as a political language that can articulate resistance as well as subjugation. Retrieving the "existential and ethical origins" of the concept (Honkasalo,

2019, p. 14) and building on longstanding feminist perceptions of relational subjectivity, various scholars conceive vulnerability as a universal human condition, an essential feature of embodied social relations that challenges liberal individualism and heteronormative constructions of strength and autonomy (e.g., Honkasalo, 2019; Koivunen et al., 2018).

Seeing vulnerability as embodied and relational helps us understand contemporary movements that foreground vulnerability within a new political paradigm that is not based in identity politics or individual empowerment. Referencing the Ni Una Menos (anti-feminicide) and refugee rights protests, for example, Butler shows that these movements reach beyond the immediate victims "to address larger systemic inequality" that produces their abuse. Demonstrating vulnerability, and "*demonstrating with it*," does not result in "the heroic transformation of vulnerability into strength," but rather "the articulation of a demand that only a supported life can persist as a life" (Butler, 2021, p. 194). Similarly, in proposing that the "vulnerable legal subject" displace the autonomous individual of liberal political theory, Fineman uses vulnerability as a "heuristic tool" that provides "an effective counter discourse with which to confront neoliberalism's fixation on personal responsibility" and "call[s] critical attention to the deficiencies of institutions and the failure of state regulation rather than the deficiencies and failures of individuals'' (2016, p. 104).

In this paper, we ask whether these scholarly discussions are relevant to the ways feminist activists who were interviewed for the GFP describe their work. How do these activists understand and address women and girls' vulnerability and the ways vulnerability is institutionally constructed? For example, how do locally-grounded activists view the role of the state and international/transnational networks in producing or challenging vulnerability? How do they establish collaborations with governmental and non-governmental agencies? Finally, how do global feminists and activists adopt or unsettle narratives about vulnerability in their local organizing?

Method

Our method combined features of deductive and inductive thematic analysis of interviews archived as part of the GFP (on this method see Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). All interviewees consented that the interview material would be archived and made publicly available online for use in research and teaching. Transcripts and video recordings of the interviews are available on the GFP website in English and in the original language: https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/globalfeminisms/. We quote from the English-language transcripts in the text that follows.

The interdisciplinary team was composed of three faculty with experience collecting and using the GFP interviews and two undergraduate students who had joined the project during the past year and had become familiar with the interviews. Our analysis inevitably reflects our different and overlapping positionalities. We are variously identified with the fields of women's and gender studies, psychology, history, and computer science, and are drawn from different generations, class backgrounds, and sexual identification, but we are all privileged by virtue of our educations and location in an affluent country. Four of us have origins in the US, and identify as white; one grew up in Turkey having ethnic privilege and is white-passing in the US.

We examined the 107 interviews with feminist activists from 9 countries (Brazil, China, Germany, India, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Poland, Russia and the US), collected between 2003 and 2019. We first proceeded deductively to identify interviews that included discussion of any of these topics: (1) NGOs, international agencies, and funding; (2) vulnerability, stigma and agency; (3) legal frameworks for thinking about violence, vulnerability and victimhood, and (4) globalization, labor rights, and violence. Different group members excerpted relevant passages from these interviews. Some excerpts fit into more than one of the four categories of discussion we identified above. Overall, we identified a total of 255 unique excerpts on these topics, with the largest number focused on vulnerability, stigma and agency, and legal frameworks for addressing violence and victimhood.

All members of the research team reviewed the excerpts and met to discuss possible themes for further analysis. These were organized into an outline of inductive observations that gradually were integrated into three themes: (1) feminists' revision and reframing of vulnerability in feminist psychology; (2) challenging existing constructions of vulnerability and victimhood in relation to culture; and (3) the fragility of alliances with a range of governmental and non-governmental organizations. We then returned to the interviews to analyze how the activists articulated these issues. In our analysis presented below, we follow recommended practices of extensive citation from the interviews (Levitt et al., 2018), all of which are available on the website listed above.

As in most qualitative analysis, our goal was not identification of highly generalizable phenomena. Instead, we were interested in understanding shared (and unique) meanings in a particular and clearly defined sample (in this case feminist activists in many countries), and a set of propositions about how the identified themes or constructs might work together to create patterns. We note that the interviewees were each selected as exemplifying feminist scholarship and/or activism on behalf of women and girls within a particular country site, but they had different understandings of feminism. Despite these differences and their diverse social and cultural contexts, we found more that was parallel than unique in their analyses of women's subjugation and resistance, particularly among those who work in more similar macro-contexts (e.g., in the context of a shift from a socialist to a market capitalist economy, or a powerful Catholic Church, or an authoritarian leader). It is always true that the precise legal, social and cultural context can create differences in detail, which we note where we can. Our emphasis, though, is on the similarities across the interviews at a broader level.

Results and discussion

Reframing vulnerabilities and victimhood in feminist psychology

Some of the feminist activists interviewed were professional psychologists or worked with psychologists, and they offered critiques from within the field. For example, Wang Xingjuan, who founded China's first domestic violence hotline, the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Center, in 1988, stated that if counselors and psychologists do not have a "gender consciousness" or "feminist perspective" they may in fact be hurting the callers by placing the blame on them. She explained how this came up in the center's

early days, before it adopted a feminist consciousness. A woman called to consult about a judge who refused to give custody of her child to the father. The woman had carried her pregnancy with this child to term because her husband threatened to divorce her if she had an abortion. The child's birth did not save the marriage. After the resulting divorce, the woman fell ill and was too poor to take care of the baby, but the father refused to take responsibility for the child. She called the hotline to discuss the unfair court decision. She asked, "[d]o you think that the courts were right in their judgment in this case?" To Wang Xingjuan's regret, the counselor responded by agreeing completely with the judge, telling the caller that "[s]he should fulfill her responsibilities as a mother." Later, the center used this example in training their staff, asking them to consider "[w]hy a mother has these responsibilities to her child but the same is not expected of the father? … Why was the mother found to be at fault for wanting to place her child in the father's custody? Why should she be blamed? Why did no one blame the father for not taking the child?" Wang Xingjuan explained that "we need to explain to people why we should take a woman-centered approach. Women are marginalized in society. Taking a gender-neutral humanist approach often masks the male centered reality, and can even further harm women."

Nicaraguan psychologist Yamileth Mejía offers a similar analysis of her work as a member of the Commission on Psychosocial Development, an organization founded in 1998 by feminist psychologists, social workers, and health workers in response to Hurricane Mitch. In the process of working with the community to heal from the disaster, Mejía realized that in the absence of a feminist focus, traditional psychological perspectives could lead to victim-blaming. She gave a vivid example of a woman who told a psychologist, "I feel bad because my husband died and I am happy." When the psychologist asked her why she was happy, she responded, "well, he used to beat me and so now I am happy that he is dead, I'm happy that the mudslide took him with it." According to Mejía, a feminist focus and human rights approach are "the only explanation that can justify the pain, the guilt and the happiness of that woman." She explained that psychologists can work with women who have experienced domestic violence with a focus on their human rights, without seeing them as "mentally deranged" or blaming them because they are not feeling what they are expected to feel.

Wang Xinguan and Mejía's interviews illustrate how feminist structural analysis of women's vulnerability informed their clinical practice in the 1980s and 1990s. They rejected traditional approaches that use data to construct a generalized expectation of "normal" responses to experiences. Recognizing that these approaches disregard gendered power dynamics and enable "victim-blaming," they instead supported women's resilience by focusing on the specific difficult circumstances and structures that place them in precarious situations. Their analyses thus both drew on and contributed to arguments for feminist psychology.

Challenging constructions of victimhood and vulnerability in relation to culture

In describing situations and structures that render women and LGBTQ + individuals vulnerable, many of the GFP interviewees drew connections between local, national, and global systems of oppression. In doing so, the interviewees challenged the notion that

"culture" works as an independent variable to preserve tradition, backwardness, and inegalitarian gender roles. Instead, these women explained how patriarchal cultural values are upheld and reproduced by larger institutions. Activists involved in diverse efforts to end gender-based violence concurred that the starting point for change must be the creation of solidarity and support networks that help women build capabilities that allow them to escape abuse, identify the sources of their oppression, and mobilize to demand justice. A close look into the stories of five activists (two from India, one from the US, and two from Nigeria) whose work focuses on combatting violence against women illustrates patterns that we identified across the interview data. All five articulated their own experiences with gender-based violence as a source of their understanding of other women's (in)ability to develop capabilities that would allow them to leave abusive and violent situations.

Shahjehan Aapa, a native of Delhi who was interviewed in 2003, recounted that her family arranged her marriage in 1950, when she was 14 years old, to a man who was abusive. Years later her daughter died a dowry death at the hands of her in-laws, a common form of femicide in South Asian societies that results from the husband and his family continually attempting to extract more dowry from the bride's family. This event mobilized Aapa to leave her household and seek legal action. Her experiences in confronting unresponsive state institutions kindled Aapa's commitment to assist women who survived attempted killings. Because "when this incident occurred with [her] daughter [Aapa] was alone," she formed a group of 25 women who raised money for medical expenses for women who have suffered terrible injuries and advocated for legal action against "the culprits." While their work spread across different neighborhoods, Aapa experienced a transformation at the personal level. As she put it, "from a lamb, I became a lioness." In 1987, Aapa co-founded the NGO Shakti Shalini, implementing a "working methodology" of providing assistance to individual women and girls in the form of shelter, legal aid, education, and vocational training while pressing for societal change. In line with scholarly critiques of analyses that attribute dowry practices to women's oppression by "culture" (Narayan, 1997), Aapa focused on changing the institutional structures – interactions with the police, and the law – that perpetuate dowry practices that subject women to dangerous precarious conditions and even death.

Flavia Agnes of Mumbai used the term victim quite a bit, not to categorize groups but to specify individual women who face particular challenges. Referencing her own experience of abuse by her husband in the 1970s, she argued that failing to recognize victimhood was a disservice to women who face such circumstances and need recognition and support. "[I]f … support was not there, I would never have become a survivor. So what I realized is that support at that particular juncture is very important [for] any victim." She noted that many victims die or continue to be victimized by "patriarchy, … neglect, … family violence," clearly pointing to the structural causes of particular women's vulnerability. Far from viewing victimhood as implying helplessness or passivity, Agnes stressed the need to encourage women who experience violence to understand the social and political structures that generate vulnerability and thereby develop a new capacity to confront the system. For example, the legal aid organization she created in 1991

depicts "gender *and* minority rights within the same canvas," highlighting the multi-layered and intersectional structures of oppression.

In a strategy different from Aapa's, Agnes further argued that it was important to shift the organization's focus from assuming that the legal system would provide women with remedies to "making an intervention about people's beliefs, values. That's where the change needs to come." This argument is, at its core, also structural. She concluded, like Aapa, that real change would not be handed down by institutions (law courts), but requires "[m]ore women articulating their rights … struggling for their rights in courts and better lawyers strategizing for these women so these rights get actualized." Thus, Agnes believed that the struggle to end vulnerability requires changing cultural beliefs and values as well as structures and institutions that help to reproduce them.

Loretta Ross (2006), from the United States, made similar points in discussing the violence of incest, rape, and forced sterilization while challenging the notion that women of color who experience structural violence were victims: "I didn't necessarily see myself as anybody's victim. I saw myself as a woman who was pissed off and was pretty much gonna fight to make sure that what happened to me didn't happen to other women." Ross rejected the analyses that identified culture as the source of gender-based violence among women of color. Instead, like Aapa and Agnes, she connected her personal experience to the racial/ethnic and economic violence that subjects women to precarious conditions in the reproductive domain:

> [R]eproductive oppression is economic violence. It's … immigration raids, it's violence against women, it's removal of children … into foster care, it's all of those things. The lack of affordable housing. The lack of child care. … And the only way to address reproductive oppression is through organizing people to protect their human rights.

Nigerian feminists Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi and Josephine Effah-Chukwuma, both from Lagos and interviewed in 2019, also linked their own experience of gender-based violence to their activism, discussed their activism as employing a strong intersectional approach, and focused on addressing the needs of women who experience gender-based violence, while also advocating structural change. Both women described domestic violence within their own families as formative experiences: as a teenager, Effah-Chukwuma saw the aftermath of domestic abuse endured by her aunt, while Akiyode-Afolabi grew up witnessing the abuse of her mother. As adults in the early 2000s, they each founded feminist organizations with missions to place this violence within a societal context. Effah-Chukwuma described her organization as "[a] women's rights organization run from a feminist perspective using a feminist advocacy strategy which is all about not seeing issues of violence as an isolated case of one crazy man against a woman but more at structures and institutions, […] and at the foundation of this is patriarchy." She observed that while gender-based violence appears to be based in "culture," this view conceals the way "culture" is composed of institutionalized power relations. Thus, she argued that not only is patriarchy "taken into culture, [but also] … taken into religion, into laws, where you see discriminatory laws for similar offenses. … In

the criminal code in Nigeria you will see indecent assault of a girl is considered to be a misdemeanor, indecent assault of a boy is considered to be a felony."

Effah-Chukwuma noted that in addition to supporting services for women, the center also conducted research because there was a dearth of information to inform policy or practices. She stressed that gender-based violence "cuts across ethnicity," as well as region, social class, and other socially structured differences among women. She revealed the way intersectionality informed service provision by contrasting the needs of rural women (focused on access to water, roads, safe health facilities) and urban women (to be free from discrimination in housing and the workplace). Analyses of intersectionality appears in a different context in Akiyode-Afolabi's account of her organization's struggle for legal changes and accountability on the part of the courts and other state agencies. Finally, both Nigerian activists linked gender-based violence with the particular impact of climate change, such as famines in rural areas, on women's lives. Pointing to "connections between the conversation about women's rights, gender equality, climate change, migration, [and] conflict," Akiyode-Afolabi argued that interventions are essential at the level of individual consciousness, local and national level social services, laws, and policies, and international governmental and non-governmental networks.

The fragility of alliances with the state and international organizations

Akiyode-Afolabi's recognition of the need for local feminist activists to engage with state and international institutions touches on a powerful theme that runs through the GFP interviews as a whole. Although the term "vulnerability" rarely appears in the interviews, some of the feminist leaders interviewed criticized the limited or essentializing ways national governments or international agencies defined women's and LGBTQ+ people's needs. More commonly, the interviewees acknowledged the capriciousness and political risks of support from the state or international donors and emphasized the need for constant vigilance to ensure that women were empowered to voice their own demands.

Alliances with the state. In countries as diverse as China, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, and Nicaragua, interviewees described state support as a double-edged sword: it could provide access to power and resources, but it allowed political leaders to claim to address women's needs while ignoring, or even actively undermining, feminist demands for women's inclusion and autonomy (e.g., Wang, China; Chukwuma, Nigeria; Tarasiewicz, Poland; Voronina, Iarskaia-Smirnova, Kochkina, Russia; and Montenegro, Nicaragua). This dynamic was at play in various accounts of the decline of state support for women's rights due to differing local circumstances, including the increasing political power of the Catholic Church and the erosion of the social safety net during transitions from socialism to market capitalism in the 1990s and early 2000s. The women who provided these accounts did not discuss this reality as a vulnerability inherent to women, but instead focused on political and economic conditions that shaped the struggle for gender equality.

In her 2003 interview, Malgorzata Tarasiewicz of Poland explained how Solidarity leaders, under pressure from women in the movement and Western allies who supported

the party's rise to formal state power in 1989–90, agreed to retain a "Women's Section" so long as it did not threaten their authority. The Women's Section, however, swiftly developed autonomous positions, demanding inclusion in decision-making and objecting to the party's positions on issues such as abortion rights. This coincided with the growing influence of the Catholic Church, channeled through an increasingly powerful party leader who took steps to suppress the Women's Section before becoming Poland's president in 1995. As a result, "the Women's Section ceased to exist in its previous shape, but the façade Section was created, consisting only of women from the right." Tarasiewicz sought out regional and international feminist organizations that allowed her to more effectively advocate for women's issues in this situation.

Three Russian women's movement activists, all interviewed in 2016, described similar strategic responses to political conditions during the shift from socialism to capitalism in the 1990s. Ol'ga Voronina explained that after "the turn toward capitalism they started calling feminism 'the belch of socialism,' because it spoke of things like equality [and] equal rights, and the word 'equality' was unfashionable then." Progress was made in building a feminist movement in the 1990s and early 2000s through strategies such as incorporating activism into academic institutes that could receive support from the state and foreign NGOs. Elena Kochkina explained that feminists largely focused on academic and educational projects because the disappearance of the welfare state in the 1990s brought devastating unemployment, making grassroots mobilization unfeasible. When asked about feminist activism outside of academic settings, Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova described how the head of a women's crisis center, Irina Khaldeeva, likewise "thought strategically" about taking advantage of the state's paternalistic view of women's needs to obtain resources for the center.

From the perspective of 2016, amid an extremely hostile environment for feminism after the election of Vladimir Putin in 2012, our Russian interviewees acknowledged the risks inherent in collaboration with the state, which crushed many feminist organizations. For Voronina:

> our mistake wasn't in working with the government – because we had to … Our mistake was placing too much trust in it. Because we could never influence it … [T]he women's movement can only influence the government within a developed political structure, in a developed political culture, where there are mechanisms to present women's interests alongside the interests of other social groups.

Alliances with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In addition to citing the fragility of their collaboration with the state, the interviewees also critiqued their movements' growing dependence on foreign NGOs that proliferated in the 1990s, even while recognizing the positive aspects of international alliances. Similar dynamics are described by activists from other countries, particularly in poorer regions. For example, Nicaraguan activist Bertha Cabrales noted that her organization's search for Western donors arose because "we couldn't go on in the same manner; there was too much work to be done and not enough funds. We would go days without food…"

These activists acknowledged that feminist organizations often rely on the funding and institutional support that foreign entities can provide, which helps them pressure the state and protects them from persecution.

Many activists also recognized the relevance and legitimizing effect of international human rights discourse for their work. The opportunities to learn from and create solidarity networks with local feminist organizations around the world were even more vital to their own consciousness and the development of feminist movements. Chinese interviewees, among others, cited the United Nations Fourth World Conference, which brought thousands of women's rights advocates to Beijing in 1995, as a watershed moment in the history of local feminisms. From a rural setting in northeast India, Jarjum Ete outlined the transformative impact of that conference on her:

> … in small places like Arunachal you feel at times you are the only one who is so concerned but when you realize there are other friends, other like-minded people all over the world, it gives you that kind of energy, the strength to go on, to move on. And also to survive the kind of pressures at times, especially as human rights defenders or even as women's activists.

Feminists from various nations also identified the potential for negative outcomes when human rights goals and funds are controlled by international organizations. Although NGOs could be powerful political allies whose support is crucial to the survival of feminist organizations, these alliances sometimes backfired. Several of the interviewees described experiences that are consistent with both longstanding scholarly critiques of how the "NGO-ification of resistance" disempowered women (Alvarez, 2010; Lang, 1997; Roy, 2016, pp. 319–40) and reassessments of NGOs' varied relationships to civil society (Lang, 2012, pp. 60–75). Voronina observed, for example, that the momentum for a united feminist movement in Russia had already slowed in the mid-1990s, "when it became all about grants – and you could only exist on grants," which "led to a competition for resources." Elsewhere, feminists expressed frustration about the need to develop technical skills in grant-writing and mold activism to external agendas, lamenting that this led to the exclusion of many ground-level activists (see, for example, Cabrales and Montenegro of Nicaragua and Effah-Chukwuma of Nigeria). Like Voronina, they believed that this fragmented the feminist movement as different groups competed to secure resources and credibility.

Some feminists also underscored what they saw as a distinction between local feminists' efforts to dismantle oppressive institutions and the work of international agencies that set their own agendas or work within frameworks set by an oppressive state. Like the state, NGOs sometimes channeled activists' energy to address the vulnerability of women and girls and other disadvantaged groups in individualistic and limited ways, which could weaken autonomous women's groups. When NGO support dried up, these groups struggled to survive. As Effah Chukwuma observed, while describing recent "rollbacks" in services to women and girls in Nigeria, "when organizations are financially challenged … the first casualties are always women."

Kochkina explained how this process escalated swiftly in Russia in the early 2000s, as "political relationships with the West began to cool down … [and] witch hunts began." When the Soros Fund office was raided in 2004, her organization was forced to close. The state used nationalism as a pretext to attack autonomous social movements, as Voronina explained: "all organizations that received foreign funding and were engaged in what they considered to be political activities were foreign agents. For example, social policy work was considered politics." There was no legal way to receive support from international organizations, and the women's movement lacked the cohesion and structure to thrive without them.

Similar themes were present in Sofia Montenegro's interview. Montenegro, a veteran of the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, described both the transformative potential of transnational solidarity and what she called "the perverse side of NGOization." On the one hand, international NGOs and Latin American feminist networks offered material, political, and psychological support that helped Nicaragua's embattled feminist movement survive political persecution and the transition from state paternalism under the socialist Sandinista regime in the 1980s to an exceptionally brutal form of neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s and 2000s. On the other hand, the intervention of NGOs to help Nicaraguans "adjust" to neoliberal restructuring in the 1990s and 2000s ultimately demobilized social movements, stripping them of their transformative potential.

Like the Eastern European feminists, Montenegro described specific political and ideological processes that reinforced structural vulnerabilities under both socialist and neoliberal regimes, as well as the formidable resistance mounted by local feminists and their international allies. She cited, for example, Sandinista male leaders' unsuccessful attempts to marginalize feminists such as herself in the 1980s, as well as the draconian restrictions on women's reproductive rights and persecution of feminist leaders by president Daniel Ortega in the early 2000s, after he purged the Sandinista party of progressives and faced accusations of sexual abuse of his stepdaughter. Feminist leaders withstood the persecution and Ortega was temporarily weakened, according to Montenegro, thanks in no small part to the international protests organized through Latin American feminist networks. As was true in Poland, however, the president's alliance with the Catholic Church allowed him to use religious faith to disguise increasingly harsh anti-feminist policies and vindictive persecution of activists.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, when neoliberal regimes dismantled the socialist state and with it Nicaragua's fragile social safety net, massive intervention by NGOs ameliorated some of the effects of sudden, widespread unemployment and impoverishment, helping to prop up a repressive state that oversaw a rapid increase in inequality. The new neoliberal state could boast of its "efficiency" by transferring responsibility for baseline social welfare from the government to NGOs. Montenegro characterized this process as creating "the Mother Theresa of Calcutta of neoliberalism," implying that these NGOs were motivated by charity rather than solidarity and that they failed to inspire people to identify the root causes of poverty and injustice or develop strategies to combat them. For Montenegro, this had "a perverse effect because instead of financing the organizations of movements and citizens' fight for their rights – that is, for more equality – they gave it to the NGOs who administer inequality." As a result, "groups

of organized citizens became institutions to administer foreign aid." This process weakened social movements as they focused on palliative responses to single issues, removed from the broader socio-political context.

Diana Martinez, also from Nicaragua and interviewed in 2011, makes a related point in her discussion of how Nicaragua's repressive state, in alliance with the Catholic Church, selectively pursued the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The state supported programs to reduce the extremely high number of maternal deaths while ignoring discrimination and soaring violence against women, imposing a total abortion ban in 2006, and persecuting feminists who protested the ban or attempted to defend women whose health or lives were imperiled by a pregnancy. Not only did the state place women at risk by forcing them to resort to unsafe illegal abortions, but the exclusive focus on maternal health and stigmatization of feminist perspectives "limits the possibilities of understanding women as complete subjects, where it is not only their reproductive lives that matter." Similarly, the Brazilian feminist anthropologist Fatima Lima, interviewed in 2014, supported the maternal care program implemented by a progressive state in 2011, but lamented that religious influence imposed a "moral dimension" and limited the program to a narrowly-focused agenda, which she believed results in "extremely prejudiced" principles and exclusionary practices.

For Montenegro, feminisms' transformational potential rests on its understanding of women's oppression as intrinsic to "the whole structure of power of patriarchy and economics and big politics." Like the Eastern European interviewees, Montenegro acknowledged the need for "strategic alliances" between NGOs and women's collectives, but she insisted that when the weakening of civil society skews the balance of power toward NGOs and away from social movements, as was true in Nicaragua, "you cannot win the battle."

Conclusion

The GFP interviews with feminist activists working in diverse social and historical contexts over the past 50 years offer strong evidence to challenge universalist and individualistic notions of women's victimhood and strategies for resistance to "precaritization" (Fine et al., 2016). Despite vast social, cultural, generational, and other differences among these activists, they address vulnerability of women and feminized bodies in ways that are remarkably consistent, although details vary according to the political context of their work. Women defined structural vulnerabilities generated by the police state, authoritarian regimes, or Catholic Church, and supported by cultural practices such as polygamy and dowry, or societal perceptions of motherhood and hegemonic forms of femininity. Specifically, regarding their work to combat gender-based violence, clear patterns emerged, including: (1) activists' use of their personal experience of gender-based violence to connect with other women and create programming aimed at maximizing their confidence and agency; (2) their focus on identifying and combating multiple, intersecting power structures (in contrast both to individual or cultural attributions) that produce gender-based violence; (3) their argument that freedom from gender-

based violence is a fundamental human right; and (4) their constant adaptation of languages, policies, and practices to changing circumstances.

Whether describing their work to support individuals who suffer gender-based violence, discussing other forms of gender oppression, or recounting their experience as feminist activists through periods of major historical transformation, the interviewees rarely used the terms "vulnerability" or "victimhood" to describe women's condition as a group, and never to represent women or LGBTQ + individuals as lacking in agency. They rejected a "discourse of protection" while enacting that of "participation" initiating collective empowerment (Segalo, 2015). They also rejected defining gender oppression as inextricably enmeshed in culture. Instead, they identified specific ways that patriarchal power structures are built and reinforced by identifiable political actors who work through public and private institutions, ranging from the upper echelons of the state to individual families. They therefore see the struggle to empower women as a collective political struggle that must operate simultaneously in various realms and at multiple levels, in which women are agents of change. Their vision does not romanticize women's capacity to create change and they are pragmatic about the barriers to change. The structural global inequities and the vulnerabilities that these inequities created are real. However, transnational feminists who are up against these barriers show how vulnerability can be understood as a political language to articulate both resistance and the need to support women (Butler, 2021; Koivunen et al., 2018).

The activists in the archive "demonstrate" their vulnerabilities by telling their personal narratives of being victimized by gender-based violence or other forms of gender oppression, while also explaining how they "demonstrate with" their vulnerabilities in their collective organizing, as Butler (2021) suggests. Their narratives defy psychological conceptions of women's victimization and empowerment that place responsibility for resisting oppression on the individual (Rutherford, 2018). In line with the "capabilities approach" developed by Nussbaum (2000), these narratives show that community support networks and collective action are essential to building individual women's capability to survive, resist oppression, and exercise rights.

We find that the interviewees' accounts do not rely on pre-conceived or generalized notions of vulnerability, but instead illustrate how women's oppression is continually produced and contested within specific, multi-layered social and historical contexts. As they recounted their different experiences in local and national power struggles, these activists converged in their emphasis on the intersectional and relational nature of oppression and the need for collective struggle for women's empowerment at local and global levels.

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Supplemental material

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