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Solidarity

War Rites and Women's Rights

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WAR STORIES

War has never been men's work. Women are always part of wars. Women fight and die in wars. Women protest and resist wars. Nothing is predictable, however, about how women enter war, or how war enters them. Since the Vietnam War, the catchphrase "women and children first" has no longer simply earmarked those passive bystanders and innocent victims of war, if it ever did. Women are also the enemy to be met on the battlefield and destroyed. Still, the victim-enemy duality remains, as the ideological build-up to the invasion of Afghanistan so clearly illustrates. On 17 November 2001, First Lady Laura Bush held her first radio conference to frame the impending U.S. invasion of Afghanistan as righteous support for the rights of women. "Women's rights" in 2001 galvanized invasion, massive air bombings, and the indiscriminate use of depleted uranium. Yet Afghan women were wholly absent from the body count of these bombings, house raids, and imprisonment. They were innocent victims only when they faced violence from Afghan men.

We could dismiss the U.S. government and media attention on women's rights as bad faith, just another tattered excuse for war. After all, many of the women's organizations both in Afghanistan and Iraq opposed the invasions and fought against the assumption that they needed U.S. arms to liberate them. Groups like the Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association (RAWA), the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), and the Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition (IWRC) denounced the occupation that followed the invasion, because none saw it as of any special benefit for women. When Iraqi women took to the streets on International Women's Day in 2004, they voiced two demands: complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the repeal of post-invasion *sharia* law, a very conservative interpretation of Islamic law wholly new to Iraq's political and religious tradition. Feminists count with dismay the diminishing numbers of women on the Loya Jirga in Afghanistan and shake their heads at then-Afghan interim president Hamid Karzai's tacit support for counting a woman's vote as one-half a franchise.

While there is considerable anger over the Taliban's mistreatment of women, there is much less concern over the rights of women lost due to U.S. military aggression. For feminists the oversight has a peculiar character, marked by what feminist theorist Iris Marion Young targets as "masculinist protection logic." In Young's words, "the apparent success of this appeal in justifying the war (to support the liberation of Afghan women) should trouble feminists and should prompt us to examine whether American or Western feminists sometimes adopt the stance of protector in relation to some women of the world whom we construct as more dependent or subordinate" (Young 2003, 3). U.S. feminists and other progressives often presume that the darker nations do not have an indigenous feminist tradition on par with our own, or, if there are such traditions, they are culturally far from modernity. There is a deep silence about the many resilient feminist resources in the darker nations, and about the close relationship between these traditions and the national liberation movements that incubated them.

The appearance of "women's rights" during a time of war is not new. It also figured in nascent and hidden ways during the Vietnam War, both as a

tenacious deterrent to U.S. aggression and as an unexpected reward for U.S. anti-war activists. Unlike women's rights in Afghanistan and Iraq, the story of women's rights during the Vietnam War is often told as one of a recovered feminist consciousness and new organizational horizons for women's activism in the United States. Scholars such as Sara Evans, Amy Swerdlow, and Nina Adams give ample credit for the foment of women's liberation in the United States to the National Liberation Front delegates in meetings with U.S. anti-war contingents, particularly when the latter met with the women from the Women's Union of North Vietnam and the Union of Women for the Liberation of South Vietnam.¹ More recent research has begun to unearth how Vietnamese women's armed struggle for national liberation from French and later U.S. aggression meshed with their support for women's rights.² The research centers the history of women's liberation in Vietnam not so much in the discourse of individual rights, but rather more in the discourse of national liberation. The tradition of national liberation bore within it a lively strain of feminism, which was the resource for Vietnamese women among the partisans of Vietnamese liberation. Our essay will document this strain as a caution not to suborn any "feminism" (such as national liberation women's rights) into the history of Euro-American feminism or claim that it is derivative. The celebratory narrative of the cross-fertilization of movements and activists in Vietnam contains possibilities for feminist anti-war activists today. But the lopsided misunderstanding of the history of national liberation struggles, and the place of women's rights in those movements, heralds more sinister developments, such as the cynical use of masculinist protectionism to co-opt feminist support for U.S. military invasions.

To untangle women's rights from war, our discussion abandons the fiction of embodied innocence in the rhetoric of "women and children first" as well as the ahistorical and parochial use of "women's rights." This bundling of biology with enlightenment humanism erases how the rights of women are negotiated and re-etched even as they seem to be won. "Women's rights" in war illuminate with heartbreaking clarity the battles still to be lost and fought again.

A VIETNAMESE LESSON

Women in the Vietnamese national liberation struggle occupy a prominent position on the roll call of influences on the U.S. women's liberation movement. The *existence* of Vietnamese women in active and leading positions in their national fight for freedom shocked many women in various justice struggles in the United States and spurred their demands for more movement space. The Vietnamese example played a very important role, but it was not the only one. Women who felt compelled by the Vietnamese example also had been frustrated by the rampant sexism in the New Left, by the increasing exclusion of women from the anti-war movement after 1966, and by the limitations of issue-based women's organizations like Women Strike for Peace (WSP) and women's legal rights mobilization groups like the National Organization for Women (NOW).³ The emergence of separatism provided an ideological foundation for the caesura of women from many of the justice organizations they had founded and led.

The phoenix of this new self-conscious feminist movement, in many narratives, rose in Arlington National Cemetery. Activists from the emergent women's liberation movement abandoned the women's anti-war coalition (called the Jeanette Rankin Brigade) to stage a counterdemonstration against the Brigade's anti-war march on Washington in January 1968. At the graveyard of America's wars, organizers conducted a "Burial of Traditional Womanhood" where they rejected the maternal ethos of the Rankin Brigade, WSP, Voice of Women (VOW), and Another Mother for Peace. For women's liberation activists, these older organizations deployed indefensible traditional ideas of feminine pacifism and stereotypical familial roles to galvanize women against war.⁴ Rather than pose as mothers with a natural tendency to oppose war, they considered themselves women's liberationists who espoused an anti-war political analysis.

The very name "the women's liberation movement" imagined women's politics in the United States through the vocabulary of the revolutionary women's groups in Vietnam (DuPlessis and Snitow 1998, 43). Activist Vivian Rothstein traveled to Vietnam in 1967 to meet with delegates from the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Vietnamese Women's Union. In her memoir of the trip, Rothstein describes how the Vietnamese delegates

insisted that U.S. women form an integral part of their delegation. “That’s how I came to visit Vietnam,” she reported many years afterward, “where I was introduced to the Vietnamese Women’s Union. This was, then and now, the largest membership organization in Vietnam, running its own women’s institutions including schools, clinics, museums and economic enterprises. That’s where I first understood the importance of independent women’s organizations” (quoted in DuPlessis and Snitow 1998, 39). During a meeting between the NLF and the U.S. New Left in Vladislove, Czechoslovakia, the Vietnamese requested, as they usually did, to hold a meeting with women delegates only. They proposed to discuss the conditions of war, the social costs of which were borne by women, such as rape and prostitution. The NLF cadres suggested a separate meeting to facilitate open communication on political analysis by women on both sides of the war.

Unlike older peace groups like WSE, the young women of the student delegation at first refused the invitation (Evans 1979, 188). The younger U.S. women took umbrage with the view that women had a special perspective on the war or had specific interests regarding war. Nevertheless, the U.S. women delegates listened intently to Vietnamese women’s accounts of rape and prostitution due to the devastation of the war, and gendered methods of torture. That U.S. women may have felt that *Vietnamese* women had special interests did not immediately lead to the recognition that *they* might, as well—this in disregard of their own legitimate grouse against the sexism of their male comrades. U.S. women’s arrogance in considering their own rights superior to those of women from the Third World was not necessarily unsettled just by listening to the Vietnamese women’s delegate reports. The Vietnamese women’s groups did not see their separate meetings as a sign of inferiority, but as the creation of a necessary space in which to challenge the persistence of sexism within their own struggles as well as to underscore the misogyny of war.

The U.S. women’s delegates did not want to meet away from the men, perhaps because it would have threatened the guise of egalitarianism or unmasked the power imbalances within the anti-war coalitions. For women to meet away from men might suggest that women are solely responsible for women’s issues, a legitimate worry among movement

women who wanted everyone to actively fight sexism. The experiences in Czechoslovakia and Vietnam pushed Rothstein, among others, to imagine meetings between women and to reconfigure women's equality within political movements. The year after her return from Vietnam, Rothstein helped found the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, an organization with a title that echoed as it significantly reinterpreted the Women's Union for the Liberation of Vietnam. "Women's liberation" gave name to a distinct shift in U.S. women's political organization. "In order to be politically potent," Rothstein was quoted during an organizational planning meeting in the mid-sixties, "women must have opportunities to develop skills and leadership. This development was unlikely to happen in mixed organizations because of competition from men and the distance women first had to travel in building confidence and abilities" (DuPlessis and Snitow 1998, 43).

The inspiration of women in Vietnam spanned across women in the peace movement and the civil rights movement as well as in the New Left. Pamela Allen emerged from the civil rights movement to become an early organizer for women's liberation in New York and then in California's Bay Area. Allen also wrote "Small Groups," the first publication about how to run consciousness-raising groups as a means to organize women. In 1968, Allen described the inspiration of Vietnamese women for all dimensions of the U.S. women's movement:

The example of the success of the Vietnamese women, who combined the fight for their rights with the fight against imperialism, and the failure of an earlier bourgeois Vietnamese women's movement which refused to deal with the nature of oppression, should show the weakness of a movement which does not deal with the oppressive nature of capitalism. . . . Middle class white women must realize that their liberation can only be won in the course of a struggle to liberate all oppressed women. (Allen 1968, 9)

Both Rothstein and Allen illustrate the powerfully instructive role of Vietnamese women and NLF gender politics. They and other activists drew lessons of how women's organization, independent from men, could

strengthen women's political participation. Rothstein and Allen understood how organizational methods and goals for liberation intertwined in a substantive commitment to fight all women's oppression, not just middle class women's oppression in the fight for women's rights. Despite their efforts, neither the organizational form of women's separatism within radical movements nor the ideological lesson of women's cross-class fight for liberation had significant bases of support within the political field of U.S. Cold War politics in the early and mid-sixties.⁵

Feminist consciousness and the rise of a women's liberation movement in the United States had other less inspirational antecedents in the Vietnam War: sexism and exclusion from anti-draft activism. Between 1961 and 1966, women's peace groups such as Women Strike for Peace (WSP) and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) led the anti-war movement both with their daring tactics and their appealing critique of war. Despite the easy criticisms of the WSP as an outmoded organization, it should be honored on at least two scores. In the face of ongoing repression, WSP refused to add an anti-communist clause to their membership policies, a practice they defended before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1962.⁶ Most groups of their size and prestige decided to concede on this particular matter. Furthermore, the WSP warmly returned the embrace of the Vietnamese women's organizations, despite all the hardship this created. In 1965, WSP sent the first U.S. delegation to Hanoi to meet with representatives from the North Vietnamese women's union.⁷ The organization played a crucial role in the anti-war movement, alongside the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Arguably, the draft resistance movement began in the early 1960s among black workers in SNCC who refused to be inducted into the service, many of whom served jail time as a result.⁸ One memo published by SNCC in January 1966 framed civil rights activism as a "valid alternative to the draft" (Jeffreys-Jones 1999, 107). Activists began to challenge the singular use of the term "service" for being in the military; to be anti-war in the movement also qualified as service to the nation. From its inception, then, draft resistance provided the political opportunity to serve the nation by fighting "the war at home" in all its manifestations.

In 1966, young men in what is now called the New Left, particularly college-based groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), began to arrogate leadership of the anti-war movement. SDS growth exploded as local groups began to form around draft resistance as a political end in itself.⁹ These anti-draft groups sidelined women activists: since men had been called to war, the anti-draft groups argued that men must be at the center of the work. Women as decision makers and activists went to the margins or even outside anti-draft SDS groups and draft resistance unions. Many narratives about the rise of the women's liberation movement emphasize the sexism of men in the New Left who relegated women to secretarial and sex staffers. This marginalization was even more codified in the anti-war contingent of the New Left. Often, women were not even allowed to speak in meetings about anti-draft activism, and many draft resistance unions, like the one in Ithaca, New York, were for men only.¹⁰

In 1967, Francine Silber compared the relationship of women with the anti-war movement to the relationship of white activists with the civil rights movement after Black Power. In the Black Power era of the civil rights movement, its advocates argued that white civil rights workers should organize whites against racism rather than register black citizens to vote. "We see the revolutionary emergence of anti-war and draft movements in response to the Vietnam War starting first on campus and now beginning to spread off campus. The formation of men only 'We Won't Go' groups leaves us women somewhat in the position of Whites in the Civil Rights movement in relation to the development of the nationalist spirit" (Silber 1967, 11). Silber outlined the choices anti-war women activists faced in 1967: forming women's auxiliary groups to provide clerical services and financial support to men in draft resistance groups, organizing "women's kamikaze groups to show commitment and daring equal to that of men," or "learn[ing] from the analogous situation of White civil rights activists. . . . Groups of women can form independent organizations with the aim of reaching other women and men who for any reason can't join the 'We Won't Go' groups" (Silber 1967, 11). Silber did not name that other alternative, chosen by many women who began to organize toward women's liberation: to leave the anti-war movement.¹¹ She also ignored extant women's groups against the war, groups that never functioned as auxiliaries to the

larger peace movement. One clear example of women's groups' leadership was the organization of anti-draft counseling centers, staffed as early as 1967 by groups like Voice of Women and the Mothers' Draft Resistance Movement.¹² Silber's elisions are in no way anomalous, since many articles by young women activists about women's independent organization overlooked concurrent examples of women's anti-war organizing provided by Another Mother for Peace, WSP, and WILPF. The rift between women active in student anti-war movements and those in women's anti-war groups in many ways preceded the "Burial of Traditional Womanhood" protest of 1968.

Analysts looking back at these events often replicate this pattern. In 1980, Leslie Cagan succinctly summed up the result of these debates. "Throughout the nation women just met without men. Our exclusion from the anti-draft struggle of the sixties was one of the foundations on which the contemporary women's liberation movement was built" (Cagan 1980, 10). Other historians, like Alice Echols, explain the gap organizationally and ideologically. Younger leftist women rejected nonviolence as an effective method of protest and saw the goal of ending the war as only a small part of their political vision.¹³ Still other historians, like Harriet Alonso and Amy Swerdlow, stress the overlap between women's anti-war groups and the emerging women's liberation movement, since some members were active in both formations simultaneously.¹⁴ None of these narratives ask how Vietnamese women or the gender politics of Vietnam's national liberation struggle operated as *inspiration* for activist women. Women in Vietnam, in many ways, link the best aspirations of activist women across the political spectrums of anti-war organizing. Simultaneously, U.S. activists rarely hailed Vietnamese women as sources for how to reconceptualize "women's rights" or how to organize the struggle to gain full rights. And, in this regard, the example shows how distant and profoundly limited the horizon of inspiration was for women in the United States.

THE MEASURE OF SOLIDARITY

Solidarity by its very function is fraught with symbolism. People and organizations express their solidarity against a common foe across oceans, cultures, histories, and knowledge. We often know more about our enemies

than we do of our friends. Solidarity, given these in-built constraints, has a wondrous quality, one that surpasses our parochial interests and worn patterns of kinship, love, and affection. To give solidarities history, contradictions, and affect may rob them of their more supernatural qualities, but it may also allow for the development of more durable bonds among our unknown cohorts in struggle. In the example of solidarities built during the Vietnam War, a range of connections and affinities developed in writings by women activists in the United States. Women in Vietnam, at their most objectified, were rendered as symbols: of revolutionary resistance, of the Third World, and perhaps most commonly, of a separatist force within the larger struggle against U.S. occupation. But alongside this simplification, even erasure, of women as active participants in the Vietnam War, there is another side that bears notice. Activists in the United States who fought both the domestic hierarchies and the imperialist wars crafted an internationalist solidarity that gave life to those in the struggle here and there, inside the United States and inside the lands being bombed by American planes.

When SDS held its 1967 convention, activists drew upon one image of the Vietnamese woman in their debates over the role of women in their own organization. The image of the Vietnamese woman they invoked was an archetype of the revolutionary woman, though one they wrenched from the context of the Vietnam War and the struggle around it. There was little discussion of Vietnamese women and their needs and demands, or even of the connections between women across the waters. Rather, the organizational formation of Vietnamese women became the focus of attention, as the activists believed they could import it for their own ends. The women's liberation caucus of SDS drafted an analysis that would not be accepted by the general body, but that offers an example of the way in which SDS activists thought of the Vietnamese women:

As we analyze the position of women in capitalist society and especially in the United States we find that women are in a colonial relationship to men and we recognize ourselves as part of the Third World. . . . Women, because of their colonial relationship to men have to fight for their own independence. This fight for our own independence will lead to the growth and development

of the revolutionary movement in this country. Only the independent woman can be truly effective in the larger revolutionary struggle.¹⁵ (SDS 1967, 4)

The reduction of Vietnamese women to “women,” and of their struggles against an imperialist war to “oppression,” gravely damaged the capacity of U.S. women activists to have genuine solidarity with the Vietnamese fighters. To see oneself in another without a scrupulous account of how the one is so unlike the other, especially in this case, obliterates the differences between the two situations. First, the correspondence between “women” in Vietnam and the United States occluded the U.S. women’s well-documented complicity with imperialist wars: that U.S. women do support such wars is something that needs to be discussed and combated, not overshadowed by the claim to mutual oppression. Second, while U.S. women began to see “men” as the enemy, this was not the case in the Vietnamese struggle, where the analysis of gender struggle came within the national liberation model. In this model, no social revolution would be possible, the partisans felt, without a frontal assault on feudal social relations, among which they listed patriarchy.

If the concerns and demands of Vietnamese women did not show up at the convention, their form of autonomous but related organization did make its appearance. The SDS women’s caucus explained the wielding of political muscle by South and North Vietnamese women as a function of their women’s unions. To gain influence in a like manner, radical U.S. women needed to pay attention to how women organized in Vietnam, not to their aspirations in the struggle or to the people and structures against whom they fought. The Vietnamese women, in this incarnation, became a model for U.S. women’s politics rather than “sisters” with whom concrete solidarity should be demonstrated through action. Drawing from this limited interaction with the Vietnamese women’s movement, women in SDS created a women’s caucus that nonetheless became an important incubator for many women’s liberation organizations.¹⁶

If SDS had a relatively parasitic relationship with the Vietnamese women’s struggle, the black women’s liberation movement in the United States tried to be more organic. In 1966, a year before SDS created its

women's caucus, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee formed a black women liberation committee to promote attention to gender issues in the movement.¹⁷ In 1968, the alliance expanded its purview in its work and in its name, which became the Black and Third World Women's Liberation Alliance.¹⁸ The term "Third World" did not refer to the formerly colonized spaces around the planet that had begun ten years before to fashion a political unity on the basis of their place outside the bifurcated Cold War (fought between the First and Second Worlds). For these activists, "Third World" allowed them to demonstrate their solidarity with that formation at the same time they wanted to indicate that they too, as people of color within the First World, had to engage with colonial and post-colonial type situations.¹⁹

The "Third World" of the First World recognized that solidarity meant more than a gesture to people outside oneself. The Alliance's statement "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force" illustrates a growing internationalist solidarity with Vietnamese women in the civil rights movement.²⁰ The Alliance evinced a much deeper solidarity than did the SDS women's caucus, but it also failed to consider the richness of women's political organization in Vietnam. Nevertheless, when the Alliance delved into the concerns of the Third World itself, the issues on the table had more to do with their own lives in the United States than with the concerns of the Vietnamese women in the war. Like SDS, the Alliance too learned from the Vietnamese women on the question of autonomy. The Vietnamese women's unions provided the women in SNCC to see that an organization like the Alliance was necessary to build power within the larger struggle. What the Alliance did not do, and as SDS did not, was to articulate their own struggle in relation to the character or quality of women's rights in Vietnam.

Unlike SDS, some among the Alliance did come to terms with the full implications of what it meant to identify with the Vietnamese women's liberation movement. Maryanne Weathers of the Alliance wrote in 1968,

Women's Liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men and

children. We are now speaking of real revolution (armed). If you cannot accept this fact purely and without problems, examine your reactions closely. We are playing to win and so are they. Viet Nam is simply a matter of time and geography. (Weathers 1968)

If the Vietnamese women found themselves in an armed struggle against the U.S. government, and if Third World women within the United States found themselves structurally in the same position, it meant that the latter had to be prepared to move to the armed struggle as well. "Women have fought with men and we have died with men in every revolution," Weathers noted, "in Cuba, Algeria, China, and now in Viet Nam." Weathers's specificity about recent national liberation movements and the kind of leadership taken by women in those movements generates a more grounded appreciation of women in Vietnam. Weathers's statement represents the internationalism of women's liberation, as it recognizes the fractured interconnections between women's struggles in Vietnam and black women's struggles in the United States. If the logic of the identification went all the way, without any mediation between the two different movements, it is more than logical to expect to be in the same situation as the Vietnamese. Such an analysis, although filled with a very warm sense of solidarity for the Vietnamese, mistakes its solidarity with the Vietnamese for total identification with them. Weathers writes of the armed struggle without any reference to its relationship with the women's unions or with Vietnamese women. Women's liberation, in such a statement, is less a movement or a political horizon for action; rather, it becomes a precondition for revolutionary armed struggle. This is far from an analysis of the Vietnamese women themselves.

Why did U.S. women, both in the SDS women's caucus and in the Alliance, fail to conduct any analysis of the views and strategies of the Vietnamese women's movement? Despite a lack of evidence, it is tempting to suggest that this derived from an unspoken assumption that U.S. women enjoy more advanced and more complete rights than do women in Vietnam. Why should U.S. women study the ideology of the Vietnamese women or the place of their struggle in the wider movements in Vietnam

when all that the Vietnamese women could perhaps teach their “advanced sisters” is how they were able to gain positions of influence within the wider movement?

U.S. women recognized that Vietnamese women had attained positions of power within their movements, and this perplexed them. In Weathers's words,

If you notice, it is a woman heading the “Peace Talks” in Paris for the NLF. What is wrong with Black women? We are clearly the most oppressed and degraded minority in the world, let alone the country. Why can't we rightfully claim our place in the world? (Weathers 1968)

Weathers palpably links oppressed black women in the United States to women in national liberation movements around the world through their comparable oppression, not their comparable prominence in their struggles. Weathers directly links a Vietnamese example of women's rights, in this case to equal leadership positions, to the political organization of women in revolutionary movements. The role of the woman in Paris was a catalyst for the Alliance; her place at the table pushed black women in the United States to demand more leadership roles for themselves in a movement that they had shaped and built.

This woman in Paris figured into several of the speeches, letters, and articles composed by U.S. women who were active in the movement. Each of them wondered how a sister from the darker nations had made it to the green table. But when they did write about her, they rendered her as an icon, a figure of a woman in power, and they did not pay attention to what she was saying or how she came to be in that position.

THE GROUND BENEATH BINH'S FEET

The woman in Paris was Nguyen Thi Binh. Between 1968 and 1973, Binh held the position of chief negotiator for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam at the Paris peace talks. If the U.S. women saw Binh only in Paris, her own people had known of her for decades already, as

a leader of the Long-Haired Army (the political section of the Vietnamese national liberation movement) and as a well-regarded leader in the women's union movement. But where did Binh come from? The U.S. women's movement did not broach the question.

Nguyen Thi Binh is not an unusual figure. Certainly her accomplishments make her extraordinary, and she is unique in the number of honors she has accumulated in her life. However, Binh did not come to her position outside a very strong feminist tendency within the national liberation struggle to which she dedicated her life. As a student in the 1940s, Binh took an active part in the political struggle against French colonialism. Modern Vietnamese feminism has its birth in this anti-imperialist struggle. An early icon of Vietnamese feminism is a Chinese poem written in blood by an educated Vietnamese woman in 1906 that ends with the lines, "All women should be united in the struggle against the French colonialists in order to survive" (quoted in Bergman 1975, 43). In the interim between this bold declaration and the 1920s, women's participation in the anti-imperialist struggle took the shape of organizations dedicated both to education about colonialism and to the development of gendered skills.

Alongside discussions about the relationship of colonialism and patriarchy, women learned to cook and sew, as well as to edit their own periodical. In 1930, Minh Khai became one of the charter members of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), and she went on to found the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU). The ICP enthusiastically endorsed the VWU, which became an integral ally in the struggle against colonialism. During the 1930–31 uprisings against the French, the VWU enunciated its charter in a set of slogans: "Reduce rents and interest rates! Equal wages for equal work! No dangerous work for women! Two months fully paid maternity leave! Down with forced marriage! Down with polygamy! Abolish the habit of holding women in contempt!" (Bergman 1975, 52). The women's unions organized across the country, both clandestinely and openly (during 1936–39). They worked to organize strikes in mills and mines, they held demonstrations for democratic rights, and they took brave positions against fascism (from 1939 Vietnam was ruled by the Vichy government, a loyal ally of Nazi Germany). In the 1940s the VWU formed the Women's

Association for National Salvation, which became a founding member with the ICP of the Viet Minh, a coalition of Communist and nationalist groups that opposed and resisted French rule and Japanese threats.

When Vietnam sundered into two in 1945, revolutionary women worked on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for their country's freedom and for an end to patriarchy. In the north, the VWU continued to struggle within the country for women's rights, while in the south, women fighters joined the People's War on the front lines. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the women's movement in Vietnam decided to push for women's education and for women to form cadres in the struggle, as integral parts for the transformation of social relations that would inevitably benefit the construction of Vietnamese socialism. In 1960, the Second National Congress of the Vietnam Women's Union made this clear, stating the intent

To confidently promote women cadres and develop their abilities in taking part in the management of production and in state management. Our guiding principle for the promotion and fostering of women cadres is to boldly promote women cadres to higher positions, to entrust them to important tasks and to train them patiently. If we are bold enough to give women the responsibility to work at all levels, they will have opportunity for training, to develop their capacities and mature quickly. (Quoted in Bergman 1975, 126)

To read the texts produced by the political project that became identified as the Third World is gravely misleading. By the 1950s, the social forces that produced the Third World were more widely distributed than during any other modern political project of this scale. These forces ranged from peasant movements in India to railworkers in Senegal, from landless laborers in Indonesia to dissatisfied economists in Argentina, and this is barely a sample. The small, almost miniscule class of "literate bilingual adepts" became the brokers of the massive social upsurge across the planet—from the second decade of the twentieth century to the 1950s—and channeled that energy into organizations that they led (Anderson 1991, 54). This group of leaders (whether India's Nehru or Indonesia's Sukarno,

Mexico's Cardenas or Ghana's Nkrumah) elaborated a set of principles that both skewered the hypocrisy of imperial liberalism and promoted social change. On paper, the Third World gleamed. As the project met governance, however, it began to tarnish rapidly. One reason is that the Third World failed to seriously undermine the deep roots of the landed gentry in the social and political worlds that had been governed from above by imperial powers and their satraps. Without a genuine social revolution in place, the Third World leadership began to rely upon this landed class for its political power. A major consequence of the lack of emphasis on social revolution was the inculcation of patriarchal norms within the new nations. This is what Hisham Sharabi calls the "neo-patriarchy," in which the Third World project, despite its commitment to modernity and modern state formation, "is in many ways no more than a modernized version of the traditional patriarchal sultanate" (Sharabi 1988, 7).²¹ Our discussion of the rhetoric of women's liberation in the Third World should be read with this in mind, although this should not be taken to mean that the Third World was merely a rhetorical fancy.

Furthermore, many of the women who attained positions of leadership in the women's unions from Egypt to Vietnam came either from the old social classes that had been able to retain their aristocratic positions despite the pressure from imperialism, or from the new social classes that emerged as a result of imperialism (merchants, bureaucrats, military personnel). Few of the women's unions had leaders from the working class or the peasantry, and, ironically, several of them emerged into leadership roles because of the very neo-patriarchy set in place by failure of the new regimes to energize the social revolution. Some women from the subordinate classes did take the struggle to the corridors of power, but they were few. Hoda Sha'rawi, considered the pioneer of the Egyptian women's movement, came from a family with wealth and political power (her father was the speaker of the House of Representatives). Sarojini Naidu, who became the head of the Indian National Congress in 1925, is still considered one of the foremost women's emancipation advocates in the nationalist movement. She too came from wealth and human capital, as her father founded Nizam College in Hyderabad and her mother established herself as a poet. There

are legions of others like them. From the contradictions of their privileged backgrounds, these women not only put the demand for franchise on the table, they also created organizations whose subsequent history would move far from the salons and into the byways of small villages and towns. These women's unions and women's congresses expanded the horizon of organized social change and firmly placed the demand for women's emancipation upon the political platform of the Third World.

Both in North and South Vietnam, the women's movement had great successes in the promotion of its members to leadership positions and to the placement of its agenda. In the South itself, women held one-quarter of the top leadership posts (some examples: Nguyen Thi Binh, foreign minister; Nguyen Thi Dinh, commander of the People's Liberation Armed Force of Vietnam; Duong Quynh Hoa, minister of public health; Bui Thi Me, vice minister of public health; Nguyen Dinh Chi, member of the advisory council of the Provisional Revolutionary Government). According to Bergman, "Women often form the majority of the village level committees and in 1970 more than thirty percent of the representatives on the district and provincial committees were women. Also, more than thirty percent of the [National Liberation Front] cadre are women" (Bergman 1975, 188). Such facts are astounding when one considers that in 1970 most of the world's political offices were held by men. (In Sweden, one of the leading nations on this score, only 13 percent of the Riksdag in 1970 was comprised by women.) Even as the percentage of women in the Vietnamese government has decreased since its high point in 1975, one analyst argues, "Still the government has continued to reinforce and expand legal protection of women and families, and the rights of women to an education that enables them to compete successfully with men in the job market. State and party officials refer to the Women's Union as a powerful influence on policy, which itself raises the status of women and contributes to the legitimacy of their claims for social and political equality" (Tétreault 2000, 58–59).

In 1974, while the war continued, the Vietnamese Women's Union held its first national conference. Delegates came to Hanoi from across the battered landmass to discuss many issues, including the role of women in shooting down U.S. bombers. At the opening session, the first secretary of

the Vietnam Workers' Party, Le Duan, offered this broad challenge to their movement:

We cannot be complacent about the results obtained [toward women's liberation]. Among the people and even among cadres, there still exists the remains of backward feudal thoughts of respect for men and contempt for women, and tendencies to disregard and not protect women's legitimate interests, and not to free women from family ties, and even cruel and inhumanitarian acts of violence against women. In the face of this situation, we must struggle harder in many fields to fully achieve equality between men and women so as to be able to completely liberate women.²²

The speech resonated for months afterwards, and when Bergman traveled the country she heard this assessment of it from Le Thi Xuyen, vice president of the Women's Union,

We must work to create the conditions for women to be collective masters in three fields: the nation, society and the self. This means taking leadership in political, economic, cultural, legal and social life. To be collective masters of oneself means to have full control over your body, the right and possibility to decide when and if you will have children and what kind of career to pursue. We must expand the ways to take collective responsibility for child-care and household tasks. We must increase the political consciousness of women as well as our scientific and technical knowledge. (Quoted in Bergman 1975, 208–9)

Nguyen Thi Binh, the woman in Paris, came from this powerful tradition (Taylor 1999 123),²³ but it is not one that is restricted to Vietnam. Binh was a member of the Presidium of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Organization, an international group of Third World countries that had created this institution to increase the interaction between them. The Vietnamese women's struggle is akin to the upsurge of feminism within national liberation movements in the Third World. In 1961, in Cairo, the many strands of Third World national liberation feminism met over a period of a week at the First

Afro-Asian Women's Conference. Women traveled from Africa (Gambia to Sudan, Algeria to South Africa) and Asia (Iran to Indonesia, Mongolia to India) to debate and celebrate, to forge an agenda for future struggle. Delegates from 37 countries and movements were organized there by the indefatigable Egyptian feminist Bahia Karam.

The Women's Conference emerged out of a dynamic that began in the anti-colonial struggles but found institutional form in the conferences of the new nations against imperialism, first at Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955, then in Cairo in 1957.²⁴ At the 1958 Cairo Conference, Dr. Abdel Rahman, known as Bint al-Shati or "Poet of the Feminist Movement," spoke eloquently of the anti-colonial feminist movements and reminded the delegates that "The renaissance of the Eastern woman has always coincided with liberation movements."

Whenever a country from our great East was liberated its women were emancipated from the fetters of social slavery and escaped from moral death, and whenever imperialism stood open or masked, direct or indirect, woman remained the victim of ignorance, isolation and slavery. That is because great national revolutions in the East always aim at liberating the people and removing class distinctions, and always depend on the awakening of consciousness and the will to live. The success of these revolutions depends on the liberation of the enslaved half, on rescuing women from paralysis, unemployment and inaction and eliminating the differences between the two halves of the nation—its men and women. (*Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference* [AAPSC] 1958, 204–5)

First, Dr. Rahman makes a generally underestimated point about the inextricably linked movements of national and feminist liberation. It may not be enough to say that nationalism always aims to liberate people across all social divides, but it is a truism that anti-colonial nationalism in most cases drew from all sections of the population, men and women, working class and merchant. Egyptian feminism, like Egyptian nationalism, has to be seen as a complex movement that incorporated people across the social classes. This is not to say that they belonged to the same organizations, or

that they dined in each other's homes. Simply put, the movement against imperialism and patriarchy drew together individuals and organizations formed predominantly within one social class or the other, but united in their opposition to present conditions and in their hope for the future. What holds these social classes and the "two halves" together is the concept of nation, not as a metaphysical entity, but as a political vehicle for the struggle against empire and monarchy. *Nation* meant the social framework for transformation of consciousness and structure, for the "awakening of consciousness and the will to live."

Meanwhile, from across the waters in Santiago, Chile, women traveled the continent to the First Congress of Latin American Women, a revolutionary gathering dominated mainly by 76 Cuban women who represented older women's organizations and women who had fought in the successful revolutionary war against the dictator Fulgencio Batista. In 1963, Havana played host to the second such congress, where women from the communist parties spoke and were joined by women who worked in various grass roots organizations, such as the Bolivian Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX and the Sisterhood of Salvadoran Women (Miller 1991, 158–60). According to its president and the Communist leader Vilma Espín, the Federation of Cuban Women started "by means of simple tasks that allowed us to reach out to women, to get them out of the narrow, limited framework they moved in." Literacy campaigns, technical training, involvement in women's organizations, and voluntary work showed women that "it was possible to take part, creating a new consciousness" (Espín 1981, 41–42). The Latin American women's groups, despite their very strong work, did not have organizational contact with the Afro-Asian groups until the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana.

Few of the movements that gathered in Cairo in January 1961 saw themselves as Europe's misbegotten sisters, and fewer still felt that they had no title to the concept of the Third World. They came to assert their location within the Third World and to insist that their feminist forebears had fought in the national liberation movements and so earned the right to craft the future. Karima El Said, deputy minister of education in the United Arab Republic, welcomed the delegates from 37 states with this reminder: "The

woman was a strong prop in these liberation movements, she struggled with the strugglers and she died with the martyrs" (*First Afro-Asian Women's Conference* [FAAWC] 1961, 10). In the longer general report to the conference, the writers detailed the efforts of women within national liberation movements from Vietnam to India, from Algeria to South Africa. "In Afro-Asian countries where people are still suffering under the yoke of colonialism, women are actively participating in the struggle for complete national liberation and independence of their countries. They are convinced that this is the first step for their emancipation and will equip them to occupy their real place in society" (FAAWC 1961, 42). That is, participation in the anti-colonial struggles would not only attack one of the impediments to the feminist agenda, but the contribution itself would transform the relations between men and women in the movement and in society. It was both the first step toward an end result and the process for reaching it to equip women to occupy their equal social place.²⁵ Not only did women join the guerrilla wars in Algeria, Cuba, Guinea, Indonesia, Kenya, Korea, Oman, Venezuela, Vietnam, and elsewhere, but women helped supply the fighters, they aided the injured, and in Egypt, India, Zanzibar, and elsewhere, they dominated the street protests.

There is a tendency to assume that feminism is a First World innovation that is exported thanks to the good graces of the enlightened sisters. What historians Billie Melman and Antoinette Burton show us is that European women participated in a racist discourse about the colonized world. Furthermore, many of the pioneer feminists argued that they deserved suffrage because they could not be in the identical subjected position as the colonized (Burton 1994; Melman 1995). Later, "sisterhood" emerged among the descendents of these feminists, who hoped to enlighten their darker sisters and liberate them, to show them the way from under the yoke of the brown man.

For women of the colonized world, the fight against imperialism had to be at the forefront of a political program. Indeed, what united the women of Africa and Asia was only not their critique of gender, although that was a significant point of unity, but that they all accepted the fundamental problem of imperialism and the utility of nationalism. "We, Afro-Asian

women,” Karim El Said said on the first day of the conference, “meet today representing two thirds of the world population, tied by the unity of the great past, the struggling present, and the glorious future—a unity of pains and aims—a unity of struggle for the rights and for the sake of freedom, peace and humanism” (FAAWC 1961, 9). Their sisterhood was formed in the struggle against imperialism, and with the expectation that political rights within the nation would allow them to take the struggle further. When Third World feminists of this era spoke, wrote, and acted on the assumption that imperialism was the main enemy, they did not mean that patriarchy and other oppressions were to be sidelined from the struggle. Imperialism represented the impossibility of the creation of political rights. Without political rights, they could not imagine how to move their struggle forward. As the political document put it,

Acquisition of national independence is an essential pre-requisite to women’s rights. Democracy and justice can become mere words without meaning if women, who comprise more than half the population in any Asian and African state, remain isolated from political life. Nor can the Eastern world be established if the sexes do not cooperate on an equal footing. They must enjoy the rights of equality with men in their political domain in such a way that the laws arranging them may reflect the re-vindication of the rights of women, their children and the rights of their people. (FAAWC 1961, 25)

Without political rights, all other reforms would be meaningless. Women must have access to answerable institutions in order to demand reform. The state could promise equal education and equal wages, but if women had no political rights, how would they make sure these reforms would be enacted and maintained? One way to make the state accountable is to ensure that women gain the franchise “irrespective of their standards of education”; the other way is to ensure that “women participate with the mass population, particularly with parties and syndicates [trade unions] in the fight for national independence and the establishment of democracy and peace” (FAAWC 1961, 25). The attainment of rights in the state and a

stake in the movement are essential platform elements of the extensive feminist demands made by the Cairo conference. These rights are important because even the brief history of independence had shown these feminist activists that the national liberation state should not be left alone to be magnanimous in its gestures. As the final resolution declared,

Rights should not be only stipulated in law, they must be implemented. To turn laws into reality depends on the unity and organization of women. It involves patient and painstaking work. It requires aid and abetment of all people of good will. But it is the only way which can lead to the real equality of men and women, the fullest emancipation of womanhood and the greatest development of the nation. (FAAWC 1961, 52)

In her opening statement, Bahia Karam, the organizer of the conference, had pointed out, "Now that most of our peoples are becoming free, the responsibility and dignity of freedom has become ours. Our countries are becoming our own, and it is up to us to get rid of the imperialist heritage. . . . [The resolutions] must not be merely slogans, but actions" (FAAWC 1961, 17). To turn these slogans into action, women needed to have political rights, first freedom from imperialism and then the capacity within the national imagination to construct an equal society.

Every right the women won was not itself the end of the struggle, but it helped build the power to further their demands. Each right built more might for an endless movement. The demands at both the Cairo conferences enabled women to have more choices than otherwise allowed by various socially ordained patriarchal norms, and to therefore have the choice to be a civic actor rather than a spectator. For instance, high on the agenda of both conferences was the stipulation that women should enter into marriage not to be bound to a man and his family, but to live in partnership with him and to continue to have individual rights within the new family structure. Another provision was that women should not marry before the age of 18, with the right to education (also to be compulsory) before that age. "Marriage should be based on the principle of the personal freedom of choice for the spouses concerned," agreed the delegates to the

1957 conference (AAPSC 1958, 249–50). If men and women have any problems in their relationship, the state should provide them with “marriage counseling and planned parenthood” services. To fight against the idea that marriage is simply about property or progeny, the conference demanded that “Drastic measures should be taken to abolish polygamy.” To offer women some freedom from the domestic sphere, it was written that “Working women should be entitled to free medical care during pregnancy and childbirth, and to a suitable holiday with full pay during childbirth.” Finally, it was agreed that “The right of married women to work must be recognized and guaranteed.” These protections for the rights of women within the family are not simply ends in themselves; they are about ensuring that women have freedom to be part of the national project. Most of the policy demands are not simply for the betterment of everyday life; their purpose is to create the capacity for an engaged civil society that includes women. The policies on marriage and on child care, for example, are essential because they endow women with choice and because within these choices lies the infrastructure for further political action.

Of the rights demanded by women to increase their political capacity, much is already familiar from the 1920 Baku (Azerbaijan) and 1958 Cairo conferences: cultural rights (the right to equal and free education being the principle one) and social rights (as listed in the previous paragraph). A long section of the 1961 Cairo recommendations on “Equality in the Economic Field” took the point further to argue that if women did not fight for and gain economic rights, they would not be able to be full political citizens. Modern citizenship meant that women should not have to rely upon the family unit for their economic well-being, but they should be full economic partners within the family. The 1958 conference already had put forward the demand, “Equal pay for equal work,” and the demand was repeated three years later. The 1961 conference offered a detailed vision for feminist struggle in the economic arena, for the right of women to hold any job, to gain promotion commensurate to their talents and not gender, to have the right to their jobs regardless of pregnancy or convalescence, to have vocational and technical training for all types of jobs, and to have the right to join and lead trade unions. It was demanded that contract work be

abolished since such work is frequently done by women, without benefits and out of the clear light of legal regulation. The recommendations called for the enhanced rights of women agricultural workers: "Equal distribution of land for those who till it and the guarantee of means of agricultural production" (FAAWC 1961, 26–28). The final point is poorly phrased, because in many parts of the world tilling is monopolized by men, so by this standard, men would get land rights, not women. A better phrase, for universal applicability, would have been "land to those who work it" (the phrase that emerged in the Mexican revolution of 1911 and has since become a slogan across the Spanish speaking world of the Americas). Finally, the recommendations included women who do not work for a wage. For them, the conference had two recommendations: that the states try to reduce indirect (sales) taxes on consumer goods and so lighten the burden on household finances, and that the state find ways to give women income support without making them perform meaningless jobs.

These demands came with no illusions that the post-colonial state would automatically be a nirvana for women. Not only did the two Cairo conferences offer a list of prescriptions, a vision of equal rights for men and women, but within these lists is also an implicit critique of the new states for their failure to promulgate many of these policies. The list demands not only that the new states adopt the new international standards *for which they themselves fought*, as in the International Labour Organization and in other U.N. bodies, but that they actually implement them. "Great national revolutions," Dr. Abdel Rahman noted, "always aim at liberating the people," including women. Anti-colonial nationalism and feminism are bound together.²⁶ Her point was not that anti-colonial nationalism is always aware of the feminist potentialities within it, or that anti-colonial nationalists were all in agreement about the total social transformation invoked by such a nationalist horizon. Not only did Dr. Rahman offer a stinging criticism of the lack of concern within the new nations for the provision of an infrastructure for family life that would allow women some measure of freedom (such as crèches and kindergartens), but she ended her speech with the reminder that the birth of the nation is only "the first step of true solidarity" because there was still much to be fought for and attained (AAPSC 1958, 206–7).

Importantly, the idea of the Third World did not demand that women submerge their identity and their autonomous organizations under the homogeneous umbrella of Nationalism. “All these women,” the 1961 Cairo report noted, “devoted themselves selflessly to the numerous activities and have, thus, actively contributed to the victory of their people. Permit me on your behalf to greet their heroic struggles and express our awareness that by such self-sacrificing work and courage they will attain victory” (FAAWC 1961, 43). Women in the struggle for national liberation did not only transform their own lives, but they placed issues important to them on the agenda. In the early 1970s, Nguyen Thi Binh described herself as the inextricable unity of feminism and national liberation, where the one is not outside the other but only organized outside it to increase power. “I am Minister of Foreign Relations and the head of the delegation representing the PRG at the Paris Conference, but I am also, and this to me is the most important post of all, Vice President of the Union of Women for the Liberation of South Viet Nam,” she said (quoted in Berman 1975, 116). This impulse had been well phrased by Ho Chi Minh in 1959 when he noted, with all the emphasis of the italics in the original, that “Women should not merely take part in the general movement but also build *a revolutionary movement of their own*” (quoted in Bergman 1975, 206). The space for women allowed them to develop a critique of patriarchy not as a counter to national liberation, but as a part of making national liberation alive to the many social fissures within the ideological concept of nation. As the 1961 conference report on social issues put it, women “participate in the struggle for independence of their countries and its maintenance so that they may be able to abolish all customs and traditions which are degradatory to the status of women” (FAAWC 1961, 29).

Anti-colonial nationalism, even in its reformist incarnations, has always worried about the woman question. An end to social oppression almost always has found its way onto the agenda of national liberation. At its most traditional, such an end looked like the modernization of patriarchy, with the new woman relegated to the domain of the home—this was the nationalist resolution of the woman question for the most socially conservative fragment of the movement (Anderson 1960).²⁷ On the more

progressive side of national liberation, we find many who argued that cultural traditions had ossified under the impact of patriarchy and feudal relations, and any opportunity to redress this had been suffocated by imperialism's alliance with the old social classes who benefited from misogyny and status. Women and men, in this model, had to struggle against conservative domesticity and reconfigure what would be the public space of the nation and what would be the private domain of the family. Third World feminists sought to reconfigure it in their own interest; to them, in the struggle for justice, the nation was more inclusive than the family, and therefore it was within the horizon of anti-colonial nationalism that they dreamed and acted.

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN WE WERE THERE?

The Iraqi government sent a delegation to the 1961 Cairo gathering. The two delegates, Zakia Abboudi Pattouh and Saadia Rahhal Farrah, did not give any major speeches, but they represented a regime that had recently passed a major law on feminist grounds. When the Nasserite Free Officers, with the help of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), overthrew the British-placed monarchy in 1958, they felt the full force of popular pressure. The League for the Defense of Women's Rights (*al-Rabita*), with assistance from the ICP, pushed the government to codify a rational and humane legal framework, notably in what is called "personal status" (*ahwal shakhsiyya*). The following year, the Free Officers, led by Abdul Karim Qasim, did two monumental things: first, they passed the Iraqi Code of Personal Status, and second, they appointed the ICP's Naziha al-Dulaimi to be the minister of municipalities. It bears mention that the al-Dulaimi tribe of central Iraq had immense social power, and that it is therefore no surprise to see one of their own in a position of authority (whether Qasim appointed her to this post because she was a communist or an al-Dulaimi is not the point for us). Al-Dulaimi became the first woman to hold such a senior position within the Iraqi government; indeed, she may well be the first Arab woman to hold such a post in the entire Arab world. The Code of Personal Status created a progressive horizon for the continued struggle of

Iraqi women for liberation: it laid down a minimum age for marriage (18), restricted polygamy and divorce, and offered a substantial reform to the inheritance laws from the Ottoman and British period.²⁸ Qasim's regime had little stake in women's emancipation as such, and it is highly conceivable that these reforms were intended to break the hold of Muslim clerics on the social world of the Iraqis. Pattouh and Farrah, like Binh, would have instantly recognized the recommendation from the conference that they "participate in the struggle for independence of their countries and its maintenance so that they may be able to abolish all customs and traditions which are degradatory to the status of women" (FAAWC 1961, 29).

No Afghan representatives came to Cairo, but not for lack of feminist activity in their country. From early gestures in the 1880s to the violent conflicts over social reform in the 1920s to the early 1960s, Afghan women fought to alter the domination of tribal custom over all social relations. Chieftains of various communities rebelled violently against the nominal moves made by the monarchy to reform misogynist customs. Pushed by rifts within the royal family and by organized social forces in the country, King Zahir Shah appointed his liberal brother-in-law, Mohammed Daoud, to the post of prime minister. In 1959, in honor of the fortieth anniversary of the regime, Daoud's government invited wives of his ministers to appear unveiled at a gathering. This inaugurated the end to enforced *pardah* in Afghanistan. The regime opened schools and the university to women, and also encouraged government ministries to accept women employees. Zahir Shah showed Daoud the door in 1964 when his courtiers convened an assembly (*loya jirga*) to write a constitution. This document's Article 64 declared that no law could be passed in the country that was "repugnant to the basic principles of Islam." Zahir Shah turned to the clergy to help define these "basic principles."

The following year, six Afghan women founded the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) alongside the newly created People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The DOAW wanted to eliminate illiteracy among women and end forced marriages and dowries. Not ten years later, despite this radical program, four of its activists took their seats in parliament. DOAW's struggle won Afghan women the right to

study abroad and to work outside the home.²⁹ Among these DOAW activists was Anahita Ratebzad, who would become a crucial figure in the Marxist government that took power in 1978. That government passed Decree no. 7 shortly after taking power, which eliminated dowry and therefore tried to shift the monetary basis of marriage. Ratebzad wrote a famous editorial in *Kabul Times* (28 May 1978) defending the program of the new government that stated: "Privileges which women, by right, must have are equal education, job security, health services, and free time to rear a healthy generation for building the future of the country. Educating and enlightening women is now the subject of close government attention."³⁰

The aspirations of the League for the Defense of Women's Rights and of the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women faced obstacles not only in the conservative social forces within Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in the "assistance" provided to them by U.S. imperialism. The mullahs and generals wanted to annihilate national liberation feminism, and although they might not have needed the encouragement or materiel assistance, they were egged on and armed by the U.S. government and Pentagon. Whether it was Saddam Hussein or Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in power, the U.S. government bolstered their strategic and military positions in the 1970s as a "factor of stability" against the growth of the left. Progressive women whose feminism came from the national liberation paradigm fared poorly, and they had almost no show of solidarity from their sisters within the United States. Afghan and Iraqi women's struggles did not light up the alert screens of U.S. feminism until the conservatives had taken control of the situation. Too often, feminists in the advanced industrial states are willing to charge in on our own version of the white horse only when the women in the darker nations seem helpless. The U.S.-backed mujahideen in Afghanistan and the U.S.-backed Gulf Wars (1990-onward, including the U.N. Sanctions regime between 1991 and 2003) greatly damaged the capacity of feminists within Afghanistan and Iraq to push their struggles forward.³¹ Their rights became a casualty of war.

U.S. feminists did not sit mute while this went on. Many wrote articles and circulated petitions, made documentaries and organized protests. Sometimes the positions taken by U.S. feminists failed to engage with the

density of Third World national liberation feminism. For instance, the Dushanbe, Tajikistan, declaration drafted by the Association to Support the Women of Afghanistan (NEGAR) on 28 June 2000 drew from most international human rights documents as well as from the two modern Afghan constitutions (1964, 1977), but it did not seem to have any relationship to DOAW's agenda. This document formed the cornerstone of the campaign of the U.S.-based group Feminist Majority to support Afghan women's rights. The ten rights that the declaration elaborated for Afghan women did not include the crucial right involved in marriage and divorce—the right to inheritance and property—but it did make room for the rather empty “right to participate in cultural activities including theatre, music and sports” (Feminist Majority Foundation 2004). There is nothing inherently wrong with cultural activities, but that these are given more importance than inheritance and divorce or the broad question of *sharia* is astounding for its lack of articulation with national liberation feminism. But overall, these documents show how U.S. feminists did appreciate traditions of feminism overseas, although their work seemed to have very little impact on the general tenor of U.S. culture. The filter of U.S. superiority and exceptionalism shaved away genuine solidarity with national liberation feminism and whittled it down to what white supremacy assumed the darker nations could handle. A wide range of feminists who wrote rich essays collected in books such as *After Shock* did not find a national audience for their various attempts to deal with their entanglement with both U.S. imperialism and national liberation feminism overseas.³² Cynthia Enloe, Valentine Moghadam, Jennie Ruby, and others did not even move the national agenda of the progressive movement; despite their protestations, masculinist protectionism of both the left and right dominated the discussion.³³ The “war for women”—as the positive inverse of the metaphorical but bloody “war against terrorism”—sucked the oxygen out of the U.S. public sphere.

In a 1972 letter to U.S. feminists on International Women's Day (8 March), Nguyen Thi Binh foreshadowed the best of what U.S. feminists tried to articulate after 9/11. Binh asked if U.S. women and Vietnamese women could meet in a condition of “fair equality” (Bergman 1975, 162). On the surface the term appears to be tautological: what is equality if not

fair, or what is fairness without equality? But perhaps Binh suggests something that is more ambiguous. If “equality” indicates the abstract sameness of individuals in bourgeois law, “fair” is far less specific. Two people can be equal, but must they be equal in the same way? Must they be identical? Can two movements see each other as equal but respect each other for their separate, although intertwined traditions? The history of U.S. feminism is firmly rooted in individual civil rights, while Vietnamese feminism emerges from national liberation—both these traditions are related to each other even as they are legitimately different. This is not to say that there is a radical difference between “East” and “West,” between the advanced industrial states of the First World and the political space called the Third World. Nor do we intend to advance an argument for cultural relativism or cultural diversity. What we are arguing is that there are divergent, but related *political* traditions that motivate both the broad expanse of U.S. feminists and feminists in the context of places like Vietnam or Iraq. Binh’s phrase allows us to imagine solidarity based on equality between and among women—not on the assumption of our own superiority of rights, but on a *fair* assessment of our mutual interdependence.

Born on U.S. soil, International Women’s Day is now a major event in the former Third World. In 2004, the Organization of Women’s Freedom (OWF) in Iraq held a demonstration against the revival of laws based on *sharia*. In a flyer the organization reminded people, “For a long time, since 1958, Iraq had the most progressive civilian law of all Arabic—all Islamic nations, with big freedom for women! It remained valid also under 35 years of dictatorship although the repression increased since the 80s.” Now OWF says the U.S. Occupation and its allies want to pretend its policies must be culturally relativistic and return Iraq to its “traditions.” The tradition of national liberation seems not to count. Yanar Mohammed, an activist with the OWF and a member of the Workers’ Communist Party of Iraq, drafted a long letter circulated around the world to explain the general position of her organization and to remind her readers of the vibrant history of Iraqi feminism:

Most Iraqis are Muslim, but does our Constitution have to be religion-based? Right now, the interim Constitution will take away rights that Iraqi

women gained back in the 1950s and 1960s. It will enshrine *sharia* law, Islamic law, instead of separating religion and state. It will be based on a doctrine that says that in marriage one man is equal to four women, that men should get twice the inheritance as women, that women shouldn't hold positions like being judges. It will be based on text written thousands of years ago that describes women as deficient in intellect. We need a modern government, a secular constitution, and we will organize women to demand that. (Mohammed 2004)

In November 2002, a group of U.S. feminists created CODEPINK: Women for Peace in opposition to the war in Iraq, a peace and social justice movement "based on compassion and . . . a feisty call for women and men to 'wage peace.'"³⁴ The group conducted a four-month-long vigil outside the White House in opposition to the war, but changed its strategy once the occupation began. A delegation from CODEPINK (including family members of troops who were in Iraq or who had lost their lives in the war) went to Baghdad, met with Iraqi feminist organizations, and set up the International Occupation Watch Center. In their meetings, CODEPINK created a relationship with feminist organizations like OWF and provided international coverage of its crucial work. In June 2004, CODEPINK distributed an action alert to its activists that drew from Yanar Mohammed's statement quoted above, notably to underscore the importance of Iraq's feminist traditions and how the U.S.-nominated government in Iraq had attempted to traduce it:

The U.S. occupation of Iraq has done a tremendous disservice to Iraqi women. It has brought suffering to the families of those killed, maimed, unjustly imprisoned and abused. Women's dreams of a better life post-Saddam Hussein were quickly dashed, as they faced a new wave of violence, lawlessness and insecurity. And then the U.S. began courting conservative Islamists who are trying to erase the gains that Iraqi women have made over the last century (CODEPINK, 30 June 2004).³⁵

These "gains" made by Iraqi women, as indicated by CODEPINK, were won by concerted feminist and national liberation struggles. They are not

parochial nor are they universal; they are neither Islamic nor Enlightenment based. They emerge from the heritage of national liberation, the premise of which is solidarity of the widest kind. This is why movements that otherwise have an antipathy to U.S. imperialism so easily adopt U.S.-based traditions, such as International Women's Day. Even though her people had been bombed and battered by the superior firepower of the U.S. military, on 8 March 1972, Binh sent her own International Women's Day greetings to U.S. women. We will close this reflection on solidarity with her warm words:

All of us, women of Viet Nam and America alike, long for a rapid end to the war. . . . We all want to establish between us, between our children, between the people of the two countries, new friendly relations based on fair equality. . . . We hope that, given our common ardent aspirations for peace, the American women and people will enhance solidarity with the Vietnamese women and people, make strenuous efforts to press the Nixon administration to listen to the voices of reason—the voices of peace. Peace and justice will triumph! (Quoted in Bergman 1975, 162)



NOTES

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1. Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (1979); Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace* (1993); Nina Adams, "The Women Who Left Them Behind," in *Give Peace a Chance: Exploring the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, ed. Melvin Small and William Hoover (1992).
2. See Kim N. B. Ninh, *World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965* (2002); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (1992); Sandra Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (1999); Karen Gottschang Turner and Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the*

- Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (1998); Mary Ann Tetreault, "Women and Revolution in Vietnam," in *Global Feminisms Since 1945*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (2000). More recent work relies on early books and memoirs like Nguyen Thi Dinh, "No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh" (1976); Arlene Eisen Bergman, *Women of Vietnam* (1975); and Nancy Weigersma, *Vietnam: Peasant Land, Peasant Revolution: Patriarchy and Collectivity in the Rural Economy* (1988).
3. Two central histories of the women's movement in Cold War United States that sketch out these originary trajectories are Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (1979), and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (1989).
 4. See Echols, "'Woman Power' and Women's Liberation: Exploring the Relationship between the Antiwar Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement" (1992, 54–58).
 5. See Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums* (1987). Left parties in the United States had not abandoned questions of women's leadership and women's equality, but anti-Communism severely weakened their outreach and influence on activism in the sixties.
 6. See Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace* (1993, 98–99); and Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue* (1993, 202).
 7. See Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam* (1998, 3–4).
 8. See Dick Cluster, "Lessons from the '60s," (1980, 7).
 9. See Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal* (1990, 167).
 10. See Heather Tobis, "Reexamination of the 'We Won't Go' Conference" (1967, 3); Leslie Cagan, "Women and the Anti-Draft Movement" (1980, 9); and Evans, *Personal Politics* (1979, 181–82).
 11. See Myra MacPherson, "Women at the Barricades, Then and Now" (1991, 496). The Jones and Brown (1968) pamphlet "Toward a Female Liberation Movement" powerfully illustrates the choice to leave gender-mixed groups altogether in favor of women's liberation groups.
 12. See Swerdlow, *Women Strike* (1993, 165, 175).
 13. See Echols, "'Woman Power' and Women's Liberation: Exploring the Relationship between the Antiwar Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement" (1992, 175–76).
 14. See Swerdlow, *Women Strike* (1993, 139–41); and Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue* (1993, 211–12).
 15. The text of this statement was printed alongside the now infamous cartoon of a Twiggy-like woman in a child's dress with bloomers holding a sign that reads, "We want our Rights & We want them NOW!"
 16. The following year no serious mention of women's Third World status enters the SDS statement on women, but the ideas continued to percolate throughout the movement. See Susan Suthem, "Women Shake Up SDS Session" (1969, 7–8).
 17. Perhaps the best known written document from this group is written by the committee's founder Frances Beal, called "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." The article was first published in *Motive* (March–April 1969) and is presently collected in

Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought, ed. Guy-Sheftall (1995, 145–55).

18. Another group, the Third World Women's Alliance, later emerged from this formation. While the Third World formations maintained some links to SNCC, the women's caucus within SNCC also remained. See Third World Women's Alliance, "Women in the Struggle" (1971, 8).
19. The theory is not entirely novel to U.S. radical politics. One can see shades of it in the "Black Belt" thesis of the Communist Party in the 1920s. Within the academy the theory of the internal "Third World" or of "internal colonialism" and the struggles against it had their most effective champion in the sociologist Robert Blauner, who argued, "Communities of color in America share essential conditions with third world nations abroad: economic underdevelopment, a heritage of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and a lack of real political economy and power" (Blauner 1972, 72). An article from Blauner, "Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt," is very close to the Alliance use of "Third World."
20. The article was written by Maryanne Weathers and circulated in mimeographed form within the civil rights and emerging women's liberation movement. The article is also in Guy-Sheftall's (1995) anthology. For more on the Alliance, see Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Retreat from Organization: U.S. Feminism Reconceptualized* (2002, 103–6).
21. We have benefited from the very large literature on nationalism and feminism, notably Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), and more recently, several of the essays in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminism, and the State*, ed. Kaplan, Alarcón, and Moallem (1999).
22. Several of Le Duan's most important speeches and writings are available in *Selected Works* (1977). The idea of "collective mastery" or *lam chu tap the*, which is the bedrock of Le Duan's speech to the Congress, is explained in the essays and speeches collected in *On the Right to Collective Mastery* (1980). The idea of "collective mastery" makes its appearance in Vietnamese communist theory from the 1950s, but it is fully developed two decades later and it became the foundation for Vietnamese legality until the Doi Moi period in the 1990s.
23. It is discouraging to find Sandra Taylor's sexist suggestion that Binh might have been "more a symbol" than "a power in her own right." While Binh's grandfather was a major symbol of the anti-imperialist struggle, it is clear that this by itself would have been insufficient to create the *movement* of which Binh was a part. To reduce Binh's prominence to her family ties is to denigrate the movement that created the possibility for someone like her, regardless of her biography, to attain such power.
24. The broader history is available in Vijay Prashad, *Darker Nations: The Rise and Fall of the Third World* (2005).
25. Two well-known analyses of the role of women in a revolutionary situation are Franz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," and Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*. Surrounded by the experience of Vilma Espín, Celia Sanchez, and Haydée Santamaria in the hills of the Sierra Maestra, Che Guevara wrote, "The part that the woman can play in the devel-

- opment of a revolutionary process is of extraordinary importance. It is well to emphasize this, since in all our countries, with their colonial mentality, there is a certain underestimation of the woman which becomes a real discrimination against her" (86). Following this enlightened statement, Guevara resorts to descriptions of women's work in the most stereotyped way, with the woman as auxiliary, as comfort, as cook, and as nurse. The actual experiences of women in the Cuban, Algerian, and Guinea-Bissauan revolutions are far more complex, as women entered combat and took on leadership roles even as these were challenged by men who, despite their left analysis, did not want to relieve themselves of patriarchal privileges. See Espín, "The Early Years" (1981); Stephanie Urdang, *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea-Bissau* (1979); and Danièle-Djamila Amrane-Minne, *Les Femmes dan la guerre d'Algerie: entretiens* (1994).
26. A thesis well-developed in Jayawardena's pioneering *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986).
 27. Partha Chatterjee analyzes this aspect in "Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question" (1989), although from the essay one does not get the sense that nationalism itself remained a wide ideological arena within which many continued to struggle despite these resolutions on a broader feminist agenda. For a critique of his views, see Bannerji, "Resolution of the Women's Question" (2000); and Chakravarti, "The Myth of 'Patriots' and 'Traitors'" (1996).
 28. When the Ba'ath Party took control of the government in 1963, one of its earliest acts was to amend portions of the Law to nominally weaken the polygamy law. All was not to be bemoaned, however, because in terms of inheritance laws, it judged that children (whether daughters or sons) would have the first right to the property of their parents, as against the larger extended family. The right of the daughter would take precedence over that of distant male cousins (Anderson 1962). For a very brief analysis of the 1959 law for its limitations, see Coulson and Hinchcliffe, "Women and Law Reform in Contemporary Islam" (1978, 44).
 29. There is a temptation among many to dismiss the Afghan experiment in the decade that began in 1979 as simply the fantasy of a small Marxist leadership buttressed by the armies of the Soviet Union. A better assessment comes from Tariq Ali, who points out that despite the fact that the Marxists had no social base outside Kabul, they did conceptualize and implement a program that had genuine effects in the countryside. "Girls began to be educated in the villages and some co-educational institutions were also established," he writes. "In 1978, male illiteracy was 90 per cent, while female illiteracy stood at 98 per cent. Ten years later it had been substantially reduced" (2002, 206).
 30. See Valentine Moghadam, "Reform, Revolution and Reaction: the Trajectory of the 'Woman's Question' in Afghanistan" (1994, 95), and Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women" (1984).
 31. On the role of the Afghan jihad on women's rights, see Human Rights Watch, *The Forgotten War: Human Rights Abuses and Violations of the Laws of War Since the Soviet Withdrawal* (1991); and Amnesty International, *Women in Afghanistan: A Human Rights*

- Catastrophe* (1995). On the role of the sanctions, see Bhatia, Kawar, and Shahin, *Unheard Voices: Iraqi Women on War and Sanctions* (1992).
32. *After Shock. September 11, 2001: Global Feminist Perspectives* (2003), edited by Hawthorne and Winter, collects some of the best writing after 9/11 and on the war on Afghanistan.
 33. Essays from the three authors mentioned are collected in *After Shock* (2003). Cynthia Enloe's essay "Masculinity as a Foreign Policy Issue" was published in October 2000; Valentine Moghadam's essay "Women, the Taliban and the Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan" came out in 2002; and Jennie Ruby's essay, "Is This a Feminist War?" appeared in November 2001.
 34. See the CODEPINK website at www.codepink4peace.org/working_for_peace.shtml.
 35. CODEPINK Action Alert, 30 June 2004. To sign up for these, visit www.codepinkalert.org.

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