Guest Editors’ Introduction

This issue is the result of a unique international partnership in higher education, funded by the Government of the United Kingdom under the Developing Partnerships in Higher Education (DelPHE) Project of the Department for International Development (DFID) from 2007 to 2009. The partnering institutions involved the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), India, represented by Drs. Nishi Mitra and Anjali Dave, with the participation of a variety of colleagues from TISS, together with senior staff from four U.K. universities. The latter were represented by Professor Stevi Jackson from the University of York; Professor Liz Kelly, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University; Dr. Irene Gedalof, also from London Metropolitan University; Ann Stewart from the University of Warwick; and Professor Gill Hague from the Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol. This large intercountry, interuniversity partnership had the goal of promoting and strengthening cross-cultural teaching, research, and extension in the area of women’s studies and violence against women research and advocacy.

The three-year partnership was dedicated to working together to enhance curriculum development and cross-cultural teaching on Women’s Studies, specifically at TISS, a premier Social Work and Social Science Institute in India. It sought to enhance the capacities of faculty, students, and diverse stakeholders—academic and nonacademic—in promoting women’s rights. It also aimed to begin the process of developing a program/center for strategic collaborative and comparative research on violence against and abuse of women, and to launch a full-fledged postgraduate teaching program in Women’s Studies. We are happy to have been able to complete all these tasks successfully. The Master’s Program in Women’s Studies has completed its fourth run this year. (It is of note that this program includes a practical field action placement for the students, working directly with women within women’s projects and women’s rights/human rights nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], which other Women’s Studies programs may find of interest.)

All the articles in this issue were written within this context of collaborative work involving faculty from the U.K. institutions and faculty at TISS. The partners focused overall on developing four key areas in cross-cultural feminist work: feminist theory and research methods, sexuality and violence against women, feminist jurisprudence and human rights, and feminist social work practice. The articles in this issue reflect these four key themes of our work together.

In this issue, we attempted to develop our articles in “conversation” with each other across the two countries, global regions, and cultures. We present two sets of linked articles with one Indian and one U.K. paper in each pair. The fifth article, though a nonpaired paper, is linked to the main theme of this issue.
The first linked pair of papers (Anjali Dave and Gill Hague) looks at culturally specific responses by activists to setting up services and tackling violence against women. We begin, in Dave’s article, with an assessment of the work of the Special Cell for Women and Children, set up initially in Mumbai, and now operating across the State of Maharashtra and other States in India. Situated in local police stations, the Special Cell provides support and advocacy to abused women and children. The article draws on the formal research evaluations of the project that have been conducted, and demonstrates how the Special Cells have made key contributions to developing violence against women services in the relevant States of India.

Hague’s partner paper in this pair starts by paying tribute to the Special Cell, and then discusses similar projects set up by activists in police stations across the world, by way of comparison. The article also discusses alternative activist responses developed in the United Kingdom and in different contexts and countries, for example, shelters/refuges, known as shelter homes in India. It concludes with a consideration of some of the contradictions and activist objections to setting up shelters in developing (majority world) countries, and current attempts to overcome and move beyond these, including the two recent World Conferences of Shelters.

The papers in the second pair (Asha Bajpai and Ann Stewart) are written by experts in law and gender violence. They discuss violence, danger, and security in transnational marriages, where women from India travel overseas in marriages to Non-Resident Indians. Bajpai’s article examines the issues and concerns faced by Indian women in such marriages, in terms of Indian laws, policy responses, and court cases. Illustrated in detail with accounts of individual cases, the article analyzes the difficulties and problems that these women encounter relating to issues of abandonment, deception, and violence. It also highlights the inadequacies in laws and policies relating to such marriages in India, and identifies gaps and needs in terms of approving Indian policy development and practice.

This article is complimented by Stewart’s paper, which concentrates on the “other end” of transnational marriages in terms of the United Kingdom. This article demonstrates the way in which concepts of abuse, danger, immigration, and security have informed recent U.K. legal and policy developments. It focuses on ways in which these sociolegal U.K. contexts present difficulties for immigrating South Asian women in “dangerous families” after marriage, because of discriminatory extrapolations to so-called “dangerous communities,” Islamophobia, immigration controls, and public security measures. The article also considers legal responses to abused women in post-colonial India, complementing the partner paper.

The final article in the collection by Mitra presents an unorthodox and challenging view of love, marriage, and abuse in the Indian context. Building on women’s narratives from counseling settings, the article looks at cultural processes of explaining and rationalizing domestic violence in India that have the effect of silencing women. Definitions of femininity, marriage, and motherhood in India tend to be grounded in women’s responsibility toward holding the family together within extended family contexts. The article shows how these concepts obstruct an understanding of Indian women’s individual rights and of violations of these rights.
Feminism envisages positive interventionist roles in the empowerment of women worldwide, and to this end, we hope our attempt to bring together writings of U.K. and Indian activist academics will bring to the readers diverse culturally located material on violence against women, privileging the diversity of women’s experiences and the complexities and contradictions of their contexts. The aim in this attempt is to better understand the interconnections between global- and local-feminist ideologies and values and culturally relevant political strategies for women’s empowerment. The articles locate distinct material—structural, ideological, and political trajectories of explaining and addressing violence against women. Together, they emphasize and recognize women’s strengths, agency, resourcefulness, and courage, which tend to get ignored on occasion in gender violence research.

We hope that additionally this issue will showcase, among other things, the different academic and national contexts of learning and knowledge creation, and will contribute to a dialogue between the East and the West on Women’s Studies and work on violence against women. There is a possibility and a need to engage in a dialogue on how to build more meaningful relationships between Violence Against Women (VAW) research and advocacy across the globe in different settings. It appears to us that the symbiotic processes of growth between Women’s Studies, social action, and social work (especially in “majority world” countries where social work may relate more closely to social change, social action, and empowerment than it often does in the West) require the breaking of the artificial divide between the academic variety of activism and grassroots activism. This special issue, by bringing together activist academics from faculties of law, women’s studies, social work, social policy, and gender studies, attempts a step in that direction. Perhaps this partnership can contribute to new ways of rethinking Women’s Studies in the West, as much as to cross-cultural understandings of violence against women work.

This issue represents the variety and disparity in contexts of the partners, yet it needs to be acknowledged that the partnership link was far wider than the issues written about by the five participants in this special issue and involved many others who are not represented among the authors. The editors acknowledge and thank all the members of the larger partnership involved in this interuniversity, intercountry dialogue for their contributions to knowledge, teaching, research, and wisdom that lie as the background of this issue. Our thanks are offered also to the pioneering students in the first batch of the Master’s Program in Women’s Studies at TISS, established as a direct result of the link, and to all the survivors of gender-based violence who contributed in various ways, including through research interviews and by taking part in the services and the TISS evaluations of the Special Cell for Women and Children. We are particularly grateful to Lynn-Marie Sardinha at the Centre for Gender and Violence Research in Bristol for working extensively on the preparation of the manuscripts.

Finally, we offer our sincerest personal tribute to our link partner, Professor Liz Kelly, who played a very important role in conceptualizing this issue and in doing the spadework, along with Nishi, in giving birth to the international partnership.
Liz could not contribute an article to the special issue, as she was caring for her partner, Dr. Corinna Seith, who was herself a violence against women researcher and contributor to *VAW*. Corinna very sadly died in December 2010.

Nishi Mitra  
*Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Deonar, Mumbai, India*

Gill Hague  
*Centre for Gender and Violence Research, University of Bristol, UK*