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Introduction: Selected Papers from the 4th, World Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 2018

By Madhavi Venkatesan¹

Welcome to this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS). The papers included in this issue were selected from submissions presented at the fourth World Conference on Women's Studies (WCWS), an annual conference organized by The International Institute of Knowledge Management (TIKM), Sri Lanka. The conference, took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka in May of 2018 in partnership with Bridgewater State University. The papers herein represent diverse evaluation methods, and theoretical perspectives, providing insight into the socio-cultural frameworks, power dynamics and portrayals of women in society that both maintain and exacerbate perceived gender inequality. The research spans the evaluation of gender as it is depicted in film and books; to field and survey-based assessment of women and girls, specific to gender violence and child marriage; and includes discussion of the role of access to employment by women and its relationship to the status of women in society.

In their discussions, the authors provide insight into the challenges faced by women and girls, particularly as these relate to the Global South. In surfacing issues from the depiction of masculinity, as highlighted by Fizerova, to the criminological assessment of violence against women as evaluated by Farzana, to the impact and opportunity that multinational corporations have on the status of women, as explored by Leite, the authors included in this issue provide tangibility to the rationale and focus of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the SDGs explicit focus on gender equality.

The United Nations targets gender equality by 2030 and identifies cultural roles and beliefs that promote disproportionate female employment in unpaid work and limit educational access to women; the exclusion of women from economic impact assessment; as well as, violence against women and child marriage; as significant barriers to promoting gender equality. Given the enormity of the challenges and how deeply permeating the inequalities are in social, legal, cultural, political, and economic institutions, 2030 is optimistic. Indeed, various feminist theoretical frameworks adopt distinct pathways forward—some pushing for immediate overhaul of gender-discriminatory systems, while others urge for a more incremental approach. Vijayaragunathan and Rasanthi assess the obstacles to female employment in the Sri Lankan construction industry. Niazi provides evidence of the exclusion of gender impact assessment in development, highlighting the displacement of women resulting from the construction of a coal-fired energy plant in Pakistan. While Lu, notes the working conditions and the impact of unpaid domestic work on women

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employed in agriculture in the Philippines. The role of violence against women, and the impact of violence on the status of women is highlighted through action research by Kriti, while Bhandari surfaces the role of cultural norms on the value of girls and the acceptance of child marriage. Robertson, both highlights the significance of culture as a limiting factor for the standing of women but also as an opportunity for women; focusing on the gendered response to sex, she highlights how sexual intimacy can challenge gender equality. Culture is both depicted and formed by media and this endogeneity is explored by Meegaswatta, Navarro-Tejero, and Ranmuthugala. Each of these three authors evaluates the framing of female characters and assesses their depiction relative to contemporary gender norms. Fatima explores the depiction of women in Pakistani film, critically evaluating the role of film in the defining of gender-based social norms.

As can be noted in this brief overview, the papers are both consistent with the prevailing themes related to gender equality and offer explicit examples to enable a tangible understanding of the issues involved with promoting gender equality. From this perspective, this special issue fosters understanding of gender equality in an accessible and relevant manner.