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Introduction to the Special Issue: Overcoming Women's Subordination: Socialisation, Law and Structural Inequalities. The 6th World Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 29-31 May 2020

By Aleisha Ebrahimi¹

The 6th World Conference on Women's Studies (WCWS) took place online for the first time in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted the way we, a global community, gather. The pandemic has also highlighted many issues gendered in nature, some of the effects of which will be lasting, while others call attention to persistent problems in need of intervention: domestic abuse and violence sharply increased during lockdown and, in parallel, there are copious accounts of women bearing the weight of increased domestic duties, with a contagion impact on their career progression. Considering gender in the labour force, women make up 70% of health and social workforce workers, yet only 30% of leaders in the global health sector are women. Discussions of structural inequality have been brought to the forefront as a result of the pandemic and the broad spectrum of issues women face shows no sign of narrowing.

The Women's Studies conference focused on women's ongoing marginalisation and subordination, the articles within this journal very much reflect that the conference was attentive to the need for change. The range of genres, topics, and author profiles is indicative of the inclusive and international community JIWS cultivates. The geographical spread emphasises the global and cohesive need to address both marginalisation and subordination, in their numerous forms. Whilst some articles argue for measures which generate greater inclusivity in arenas where women seek to take on more active roles, demonstrating a liberal feminist approach, we also see authors advocate for a transformation and overhaul of systems, a more radical approach.

The articles in this journal edition are broad in scope and richly diverse, each making a contribution to global feminism. A number of articles reflect on women's history and give a voice to women, preserving their stories of abuse and trauma: all of which need to be documented in and acknowledged by history. The journal issue contains contributions to: gender in education and politics; women in the labour force; the marginalisation of Roma and Indian Dalit 'lower' caste women; and reflections on great feminist literature by the late Nawal El Saadawi.

Joy Ogbemudia's article considers the discrimination and structural inequality faced by BAME women, with a focus on Nigerian women in the UK. Her empirical research offers a valuable insight into how Nigerian women experience the UK labour force, with a number of accounts of institutional sexism and racism. Following this, Bhushan Sharma's article contributes to the discourse on Dalit women and proposes the development of a feminist methodology with respect to the Dalit experience, including forced pregnancies, dangerous birthing environments and the realities of motherhood when living in poverty and sexual servitude.

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The views and opinions expressed in this introduction are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any United Kingdom Government Department.

Stefan Sauer's work considers women in the labour force, focusing on desired but unrealised female empowerment in software development, notwithstanding access to higher education for women, prompting reflection on the relationship between education and career potential. Turning to politics and the labour force, Vishal Wilde proposes a new voting system with gender quotas in order to progress towards a more gender-equitable construct of political representation.

Steffi Sarah Deb contributes to women's voices in history as she offers an 'alternative narrative' of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, deviating from the masculine history which has been documented. Compelled to commit the experience of women to history, she looks at both war and post-war lives of Bengali women. Her work seeks to counter the systematic silencing and side-lining of women in history, especially with regard to the gender-based violence they have experienced, suffered and survived.

A valuable piece of intersectional work is offered by K.A Geetha, whose examination of the Devadasi system in India considers gender, caste, and sexuality. The Devadasi infrastructure sees young 'Dalit' women dedicated to worship and who are committed to serve a deity or temple for their lifetime, then habitually coerced into a life of sexual enslavement. She reconceptualises the homogenous approach taken to perceiving and understanding Dalit women and offers a diverse account of their complex and multidimensional history.

The roles and spaces which Indian women occupy in the Information Technology sector is considered by Mohammed Abdul Rahman Khan, Sudatta Banerjee and Swati Alok. The authors critique the disproportionately low number of women in senior positions, attributing the various barriers they face to patriarchal practices.

Benon Tugume scrutinises the great Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero* which takes an intersectional approach to the mechanisms of women's oppression and the inherent links to patriarchy, class and religion. Tugume's article is the first to be published in JIWS on Nawal since her death in March 2021. Whilst the world lost the physical presence of Nawal, her words, wisdom, and legacy very much remain with us.

Malieka Farah Deeba's empirically informed research explores the linguistics of sexual harassment against the backdrop of Pakistani laws to address such gendered abuse in the workplace, and Laura Corradi's work uses Roma women as an example of how women can face oppression in a multitude of ways. She advocates for alliances and coalition building between diverse activist groups to collectively strengthen the fight against the subordination of women.

In their article on gender in education, Rommel Curaming and Sharifah Nurul Hude Alkaff examine the way gender is presented in English language textbooks in Brunei. Recognising that the school system is a fundamental agent of socialisation, the authors consider how women and girls are presented in literature at a school level and situate this within the larger context of gender dynamics in Brunei. Collectively, this special issue offers an insight into a diverse range of international topics concerning women's human rights, role in society and the flawed approach taken to chronicling female history.

This special issue also comes at a particular point in time: the tragic death of 33-year-old Sarah Everard, murdered in London, saw protests where women, united in grief, outrage and despair, sought to 'reclaim the streets'. Concurrently, the Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 was debated in the Parliament of the United Kingdom, demonstrating that violence against women takes distinct forms in the private and public spheres, but is nonetheless endemic. Globally, we have been witness to violence against women and girls with rape rates soaring during the pandemic, young women university students in Palestine remain arbitrarily detained during crucial educational

years, women remain less visible in politics internationally and the world continues to await justice for Breonna Taylor. The conference concepts of subordination and marginalisation have proven to be especially topical in light of the contemporary landscape.