

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Vindhya Undurti

*Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford
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rights group and one of the first issues we had taken up was domestic violence. There is this term in India called dowry deaths, so that was like symbolic of women being of course burned for dowry, women being totally devalued and looked upon as a liability rather than an asset. When she goes from her parents' home to her husband's home, the in-laws have to be compensated in a sense for taking her on, so that is what is called "dowry" So there were a couple of dowry deaths in the city that I was in and there was a women's group which had taken up this kind of issue, it was the very first time in our city.

At that time there were certain other cities, particularly Delhi, which had seen some anti-dowry deaths movement just starting up but in our city we had not yet seen it. So when I took up that issue and I argued in our human rights group meeting that we should be taking it up, after all it's a woman's right to life itself being violated, the reaction I got from some of my colleagues in the human's right group was, "Oh well, that's a women's issue. Let the women's groups do it. This is not exactly a human rights' issue." And this was much before the United Nations in that decade, 1975-1985, had come up with the slogan, "Women's rights are also Human Rights." So it was not something, this kind of a consciousness that I got, was not something which was from outside. I felt that it was very unfair that our human rights group was not willing to take up the case of domestic violence. At that point of time we didn't call it domestic violence, we used to just call it dowry deaths or dowry murders but I felt it was somehow unfair on the part of our human rights group not to take it up. So I said, "Well I'm willing to do something about it." So I went along with the other women's group, we did a march, we went on a rally and then we did a whole lot of things. And then I thought, why not actually look at these cases and investigate what is the response of the criminal justice system to these cases, what is [the] outcome of these cases? These women are dying and we go on a protest march or something like that but then what is the follow up to all of this? So I actually went to the courts in our city, sat in a dusty old archives room, got out all the records, because at that time, they were not computerized and they didn't have them digitized in the records. So I pulled out all the records and started actually examining court judgments to see what is the outcome of these cases and what struck me was even the interpretation of the judiciary was extremely biased and was dependent on a kind of a construction of womanhood which denied rights to women.

I examined something like 450 cases and these were all cases of women who had already died and of course their husbands or whoever, the perpetrators had been charged but one dark thing, very, very startling thing that came out was the conviction rate was very, very low. It was I think just about 10%, whereas 90% of them had been acquitted. So I wrote up this report and it came out on behalf of the human rights group that I was working with and later of course my colleagues in the human rights group congratulated me for bringing out that report but I somehow thought this is, as I said, this attitude was unfair. Later I got that published in *Violence Against Women* journal. I would say that particular experience of participating in first, the activism outside and then actually using my research training to sit and write a report and reflect on particularly the biased constructions of womanhood by the judiciary which were denying women's rights to life and to dignity, was actually the beginning of my feminist activism. In fact, I would definitely say that was the experience, this was in the late 1980s, that made me articulate that I'm a feminist. And that was also the beginning of reading a lot of western feminist literature and I was particularly influenced by bell hooks in the early 90s.

Another very significant event in my life at that point in time, was attending the 3rd Indian Association for Women's Studies meeting. I'd never been exposed to anything called women's studies and I [thought], "Here is an answer!" Because I was so dissatisfied with the way

psychology was being taught and practiced and so on and I thought, “Yes! This is something that I could just gravitate to.” And I found actually a community of scholars that were thinking along the same lines, who had similar attitudes and things like that, so that was actually the beginning of finding for myself a kind of feminist community of scholars.

AR: As you pointed out, in terms of finding feminism in psychology that would have been a very difficult search, both then and possibly now too.

VU: In fact, there were two or three colleagues of mine at the university, we had all just completed our PhDs. PhDs are always done under a lot of compulsions and so on. I mean also in India, what the supervisor says carries a lot of weight, so I thought completing my PhD would have actually opened doors for me and would be the beginning of my work rather than the summation of my work or something. I never really regarded my PhD as something really important, so I said, “It’s only now that I’m free, free to do what I want to.” So these three colleagues, the three of us, we actually used to have these little discussion meetings that were extremely fruitful, especially in a period when access to literature was very, very difficult for us. This was not the time of the Internet, so it was only a visit to the library, getting whatever we got from there.

So we used to have these little discussion meetings and pick out any journal, start reading some of the articles, have a discussion between classes as to what it means and so on. And that was the time we stumbled upon this concept of “fear of success” and so we thought that this was something which [*was*] talking about women at last (laughs). But as we went through that concept, we said, “Hey, [*there*] is something not quite right about the concept of fear of success also, is it a personality variable? If it is, if most women have this, if it is something inherent to them, then what is it that women can do to change? Or is it something that is imposed by society?” So we kept sort of having that discussion and I would say that was the beginning of my introduction to feminist literature.

AR: And was this during your PhD or just after?

VU: Just after, it was during the late eighties. I got my PhD in ’86 and so this was just after that. I certainly remember that just after my PhD I started reading about this stuff.

AR: Well, tell us a little bit about what originally drew you into psychology.

VU: Actually for that, I’ll have to tell you a little bit about our education system. Because making a choice of courses to study, I’m talking about the 1980s, is not something planned or systematic. So I had actually graduated with English Literature and History and Political Science, and I was about to get into [*a*] masters [*program*], I thought, “Okay, I’ve already done English Literature, I’ve studied it, why not just take psychology?” So it was an absolutely casual whim. And then we have an entrance examination [*for the master’s program*] and I don’t remember what I studied, must have been an introductory psychology [*text*]book I think by Hilgard and Atkinson and I just wrote the test and I passed the entrance examination to my utter surprise (laughs). So there I was and I thought, “Okay, let’s do this!” and I had no absolutely idea of what the whole subject was. And I just went through the master’s, studying all the different courses. It was only actually when I was participating in the human rights movement that I began to somehow question the usefulness and relevance of psychology. So it sort of dovetailed with my activism outside [*of school*].

I used to actually live two different lifestyles at that point in time. Soon after I completed my PhD, I got a job, an Assistant Professor job, and this was a completely different life. I used to come, take my classes and then go back to the world beyond. And that was the time I began to question the usefulness of psychology particularly in our kind of context, what is the relevance of it? Then because I was getting interested in feminism, I began to actually actively look for feminist sources/resources in feminist psychology and that was the time that I read this article by Crawford and Marecek, *Psychology Constructs the Female* and Phyllis Chesler's, *Women and Madness*. These were some of the texts that profoundly influenced my thinking at that point of time. And in fact last year when I met Jeanne Marecek in Thessaloniki, Greece, I didn't have words enough to convey to her how much her writing has influenced me.

AR: That's wonderful. Can you tell us, going back to your PhD in psychology, what were the kinds of things you were studying? What was the content of the curriculum for you?

VU: During PhD or during master's?

AR: During master's I guess. Master's and PhD.

VU: During master's, I think we had something like 15 different courses, but the course which excited me most was called History and Systems of Psychology. Because I really liked the history of ideas and especially the history of western science and how psychology got itself distanced from philosophy and how it got onto natural science. I didn't quite make the connection between the natural science paradigm, quantitative methods, and how it doesn't really capture women's lives and experiences. I hadn't really made those connections but I was very interested in the way psychology had evolved. That was one particular course I was really interested in. The second one was what we used to call in that point of time Abnormal Psychology, now we call it Psychopathology. I don't really see much of a difference between the two terms (laughs) but even that was one of the courses that really interested me. Later on, in fact, some of my interests, particularly in women's mental health can be traced to the fact that I really liked this course. Then of course, Social Psychology was another one, particularly the theory of social identity with Tajfel and Turner. That really interested [me] at that point in time. And I thought Social Psychology is one course that is extremely relevant to the Indian context; I can take many of the things from Social Psychology to understand what's happening [within India]. Particularly, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, social cognitions, attributions, these were some of the concepts which I thought could be very applicable to our context.

AR: And that's sort of why I was curious about what you were learning because there has been this critique that a lot of, especially in the post-World War II period, a lot of the psychology that got exported elsewhere was American psychology and I wondered how you felt about that in terms of its relevance to the Indian context as you were learning it or soon thereafter.

VU: As I said, the Social Psychology that we were learning at point of time was heavily North American. In fact, even [pertaining to] the theory of social identity, Tajfel and Turner were not really American, that actually came to me much later [in my academic career]. [The theory of social identity] was not part of our North American psychology curriculum [taught at the university]. These are all self-discoveries, so to speak. But then as I said, most of social psychology which was being taught to us, since it was so heavily North American, the first question that I had got was, "Why are we studying?" Well no, not why are we studying... yes we

know quite a bit about race but where does caste fit in here? And caste is very much an aspect of our social lives [*in India*]. But then, I don't remember the textbook that we were following, I think it was Baron, Introduction to Social Psychology, Baron one of the first editions; now of course it has gone through several editions. In fact, I don't think there was anything on gender either in the book. Now of course these books are more sensitized and updated but not at that point in time. So I used to have these questions and I remember asking one of my teachers, "Why are we not studying caste?" and I was very dissatisfied with the response I got; "Well, it's not there in the book." (Laughs) so I said, "Why don't we look to other disciplines like sociology or something which obviously have so much about caste?" And then he said, "Then you should have been in sociology, not here." So these were kind of the beginnings of my kind of dissatisfaction with the way psychology was taught. It sort of changed a lot now, it's been 25 years and I remember when we were updating and revising the social psychology curriculum when I joined, we had put in a lot on caste and gender and so on. So that was my way of compensating (laughs).

AR: Did you have any female teachers?

VU: I did.

AR: And were they... what was your experience? Were they mentors? Did you have any mentors?

VU: No. In fact, that is a lack that I feel very strongly about and therefore to my own students, I feel very strongly about the fact that they need mentoring and so I've had about eight students complete their PhD with my guidance and another eight [*have*] done their M Phil. And I think to all of them I've been a hard task master at times but I suppose the kind of access I gave them, much beyond the academic framework, was in a way trying to address that issue that how inadequate a student is if he or she does not have a proper mentor. So I wanted to address that and not be like that. I didn't really have a role model to fall back on, in fact, even the female teachers I had were.... Anyway I probably shouldn't be saying this about my teachers (laughs).

AR: Ok, so I want to go back to this moment where your work on dowry deaths kind of really brings into coalescence this kind of merging of feminism and psychology for you. What did you do with that after that report? How did that then influence your trajectory, particularly your research trajectory as a psychologist?

VU: In fact when I published a paper on looking at how the criminal justice system in India looks at issues of dowry deaths, looking back I feel like it's quite a, in all modesty I should say, it was quite a pioneering paper in [*the*] sense that nobody was looking at or examining court case records to see what is being the outcome of these cases in court. Later on a lot of people had done research [*on this topic*]. I actually brought it out as a pamphlet first, it was a kind of a human rights group pamphlet, later I wrote it up as a research paper.

After that, one of my students actually did a series of interviews with men who had been charged with murder or of suicide for the deaths of their wives. Of course, the student was heavily influenced by me but she thought it would be a nice thing to actually try and understand from the perpetrators' point of view as well. Again one of the very startling things that came out from this report was the complete lack of remorse or guilt on the part of the perpetrators. This again tied up with the construction of violence, particularly patriarchal violence as a very naturally socially

sanctioned kind of outlet. So I was very struck by that fact because they were kind of intensive, in depth interviews, and this was in fact one of the big themes that came out; that there was absolutely no guilt or remorse. After that, again one of my students did a complete psychological profile of the perpetrators. They were actually trying to study, in a sense, masculinity, though of course I wasn't really, really clear of what masculinity would entail at that point in time. But I found that violence against women and particularly violence against women in intimate relationships is something that is, as I said earlier, sanctioned by patriarchy. So it is not a kind of a generic male violence, it was much more a violence coloured by the social location of the perpetrators as well.

After these series of studies, I actually turned towards looking at the relationship between mental health and domestic violence. Then I did a series of studies, some kind of epidemiological studies on hospital case records, secondary analysis of data. We tried to look at the pattern and prevalence of women's mental health problems. I was influenced by one leading researcher in India, [a] feminist researcher in India called Bhargavi Davar. She's been very instrumental in facilitating my move towards studying women's mental health and she had brought out a book called *Mental Health of Women in India* and it's quite a classic volume in that sense.

AR: What is her disciplinary affiliation?

VU: Actually, interestingly her discipline is philosophy but she has been very much interested in issues of mental health and she's in fact formed a group. She works for a non-governmental organization which is completely devoted to studying women's mental health - that again was something unheard of at the point of time. So we looked at, as I said, the pattern and prevalence of women's mental health, women's mental disorders. What we found was that when it comes to severe mental disorders there's not much of a difference between men and women, women as well as men can be equally affected by that. But when it comes to common mental disorders, and this particular distinction between severe and common I take from Goldberg and Huxley, who are again British psychiatrists. I think one of them is a psychiatrist and the other is a sociologist so I take this distinction, this categorization from them. So when it comes to severe mental disorders there isn't much of a gender difference but when it comes to common disorders, more women are represented in these disorders.

Now what does this mean? Severe mental disorders could have a biological origin whereas common mental disorders are ones which have much more psychosocial causes and if women are more represented in common mental disorders that means that it is their roles in society, positions in society, the work they do in society which are actually contributing to these mental health problems. So this again made me look at women's mental health issues in terms of very large, broad, social structural determinants of mental health. So I published it and then a couple of my students also worked on their PhD dissertations in this area. Then we later in fact brought out a book as well. So the way I linked violence with this was, if we look at psychosocial origins of women's psychological distress, I would say violence again happens to be one of the principal factors in these social determinants. So that is how I sort of linked up violence as well as mental health.

AR: I want you to speak about some other aspects of your work. But I don't want to go there until I ask a little bit more about how in all of this, your professional development, your development as a researcher, what role is having your own family also playing in this narrative?

VU: As I said, I don't know whether I've been... I don't want to use the word "fortunate" because I would like to attribute what I went through not just to good fortune but also to the way I conduct myself and the way I conduct my relationships and so on. So while I was in fact still in the university I met this wonderful guy, he was extremely loving, extremely caring, extremely fun to be with and in fact in every sense of the word, he's a companion. And this was when I was 19 years old and he was 21 years old. And he's actually a marine engineer, so soon after we got engaged in fact he just disappeared (laughs) because he went sailing. In fact for another one and a half years he didn't come back home, so those were the days when communications was also not very advanced. So it used to be sometimes two to three months before I got a letter from him or anything. But that was also a time we actually grew through our exchange of letters, even now at home I have this huge bundle of letters written. We didn't have email and all that at that point of time but that was also that self-expression through letters that actually gave us opportunities to grow as well. So ever since then we've been together, though of course there've been long periods of separation from each other. And so from the time I was 19 until now, I've been with him. We've had our ups and downs and things like that but he played an extremely important role in being like a rock for me and it's only with him that I can be myself, I don't have to put on any kind of a persona. Because even with my students, they are always looking up to you for something, you can't let your vulnerability be exposed to them. You are expected to provide all answers and things like that but with him as I said I can be my natural self. So that way it has been great.

AR: And you have a son too.

VU: Yes! But I've had quite a difficult relationship with my son I should say. Partly because I became a mother very early in life, I was just 21, I was not really prepared to be a mother so to speak. And also because we were going through this period where my partner was still sailing so we didn't really have a settled home and I was with his parents and we had this huge joint family where there were three generations of people. So my husband's grandparents, his parents, myself as well as my son, we were all together. And I played the role of kind of an ideal daughter-in-law so to speak because I wanted to play out each of my roles to the best of my ability. So that took up quite a bit of my energy and time. Now when I look back I feel very guilty, I didn't really enjoy the pleasure of being a mother to my son, it was more like a responsibility that I had to do certain things for him particularly in the absence of his father for long periods of time. Sometimes I take it too hard on myself but I suppose that is how it is.

AR: Well when he was very young then, you were still a student...

VU: Yes, I was doing my PhD then.

AR: And how did that kind of work to combine that?

VU: Oh it was terrible! In fact, taking him to school, putting him there, rushing back to the university trying to do my stuff. As I said, this was not the era of the Internet. We used to spend long hours in the library. We used to have these little library cards where I used to take down my notes and abstracts of the various journals and articles and so on. And I used to work something like 14 hours a day and then rush back and do whatever's expected of a daughter-in-law which is again cooking, assisting my mother-in-law helping to prepare meals and as I said we had a large family and people coming and going and so on. So it was quite something.

AR: Well just having you say it that way reminds me of what you said at the beginning of the interview, where you observed your mother doing essentially the same thing; working a busy full time job... Did you, during your professional training, well at any point actually, did you feel like you experienced sex discrimination or discrimination of any other kind?

VU: Not really because at the workplace in the university, also because it was the same department where I had studied that I got a job, people knew me right from the beginning. And since I was sort of regarded as someone who was a serious academic and so on, they gave me my space. Definitely there used to be a lot of regard for me. And as I said earlier, at home of course with my in-laws it was a different thing, when we, [*my husband, son and I*] had our own home it was based on equality. But I did have some experience of sexual harassment. I wouldn't say it was of a grave nature or something like that, but that also made me actually think about how significant sexual harassment can be as a barrier to women's effective participation in the public domain.

I remember there were two incidents, two rather nasty incidents that I faced. Not exactly at my university but when I'd gone out for a semester at some other university. And the first time, even the reactions of others were all in the form of victim blaming; "Why did you do this?" and so on. And even my seeking justice so to speak from authorities didn't really yield much of an outcome. But in the second incident, this is again a very valuable lesson that I learned from a very senior academic whom I respect a lot, he actually showed me or told me the difference between being aggressive and being assertive. And so he said, "If you want to complain to the authorities, if you go and tell him the way you have told me now, you come across as being either very emotional or being aggressive and I don't think that either of these two strategies would work. Just go and tell the authorities that this is what has happened to you and you would like some action. So just be assertive. Say it but don't be aggressive and don't keep on being hyperemotional about it." So I did that and I found that just being assertive was paying dividends because within the next one hour the person who was doing it, my harasser, was out of the institute.

AR: Wow!

VU: Within an hour! So I keep mentioning this to many people, I do a lot of capacity building sessions so I do tell them that this is a valuable lesson I learned in life: to be assertive and not to be aggressive. Because I used to be very, very aggressive earlier but I found that being aggressive also makes you feel very isolated but being assertive pays (laughs).

AR: That's a good piece of advice. Vindhya, I want you to talk a little bit about some of your recent work. You have a lot of different strands to your work but you recently published an article in *Feminism and Psychology* about the collective identity processes of women activists in India and I wondered if you could trace the evolution of that project and what you found.

VU: This is in fact a kind of a dream project for me because I had been planning to do something like this for a very long time but somehow couldn't. But in fact it was trying to understand myself through these activists who belonged to a very active political organization. Although it was a women's organization it was allied to a political ideology of Marxism and Maoism. So in a sense, though I had participants in my study, I was actually trying to understand myself. I wanted to study the linkages between collective identity and well-being, subjective well-being and things like that. This was a recent article but I was sort of planning to do something like this for the past

seven or eight years. I thought that collective identity is a valuable concept, which lies at the intersection of the psychology of the individual and the structure and functioning of a larger group. The collective identity concept itself bridges again the structural and the personal. So I wanted to see whether the collective identity of women activists who were allied to this political ideology of Marxism and Maoism, what did they think about themselves, how did they self-define as activists, did they feel good about it and what actually sustains their involvement.

Very often the awards for belonging to such an organization are actually not many. There are extrinsic awards in the sense of increased social status or enhanced prestige and [but] there are very little intrinsic awards. So what actually makes them take up such causes that are very risky and unconventional and at times can even imply loss of life, threat to freedom and so on. So I was interested to see why they do that because I myself had done it and I went through a couple of quite significant experiences earlier on.

So when I started doing this, these were mostly women whom I knew because they were activists of the women's group. In the beginning they too said, "Oh, what is there to talk about? We always talk about society and social justice." But I realized that this was actually probably their first opportunity to talk about themselves and what followed was literally an outpouring of themselves. So I'd used this 20-statement Who am I? Test [and] I thought would be a good enough tool to capture their self-description. What I found was that most of them had primarily given statements which belonged to what is known as allocentric categories which is affiliation to others and so on. Also one of the important things that I found was that their identity was in terms of [a] large group rather than a small group, small group mostly referring to the family. So these were interesting things which came out of the study. And then as far as linkages with well-being are concerned, I found that most of them were quite high on autonomy, competence but relatedness was low. This I interpreted as relatedness in terms of family being low but relatedness in terms of belonging to a particular social group was fairly high.

So this particular study to me means a lot, because as I said, it's like kind of discovering myself in the process and to find out what actually makes these activists tick, when they continue to be members of an organization which may not really yield anything. And also it's kind of a cause which is often lost in that sense, it's a lost cause because most of them are struggling for some kind of a better society which they may not actually see in their lifetime. And also as I said because they are allied to this kind of Maoist ideology there's a lot of repression from the state. But still they continue to do so, so it is that badge of identification with this group which makes them feel proud, which actually sustains their involvement in the organization.

AR: Did the kinds of things they told you about what sustains them, did those things resonate with you in your experience?

VU: Yes of course because I was also trying to look at the formative influences as to how what actually made them go into this kind of life and I found two important things. One was literature, literature meaning political literature. In fact most of the participants talked about Maxim Gorky's [book] *Mother*, which had a tremendous influence on them and so it did for me. And most of them who were not even educated in English and so went through translations of this kind of literature and so on. The second one was the kind of charged environment at home, some of the participants alluded to the fact that in the 1970s we had what is known as National Emergency. The prime minister Indira Gandhi had declared a national emergency and lots and

lots of people, those who were anti-government, were thrown in jail. So many of the participants traced back their activism to the kind of charged atmosphere that was prevalent at home which also resonated with what I went through in the 1970s and so on. So these formative influences, at least I found that *[they]* were very much similar to mine.

AR: Great. Well let me switch gears a little bit. You have done several visiting fellowships, Fulbright *[programs]* abroad, in the United States, the UK. Can you tell us a little bit about those, why you decided to do them, what you learned from them, and so on.

VU: The first scholarship that I went to was in Oxford and I had written a proposal called *Arms and the Woman*, the title taken from Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. I wanted to actually study the psychological dynamics of women comrades of the political organization. That was actually the beginning, though this *Feminism and Psychology* article was much, much later. And I just sort of came across an ad in one of our leading social science journals, this was in '98 I think, it was from Oxford University, Queen Elizabeth House, asking for research proposals for a visiting scholarship position. So I didn't really think much about it and I just wrote that proposal because as I said it was all the time in my mind that I had to do something about this. So I wrote that and I sent it and within a couple of months, three or four months, I got a letter from them saying that you're accepted and you can come and do your visiting scholarship for a period of three months.

As I said, it was not really planned and until then I had not really seriously thought about going abroad because after my PhD I was so very engrossed in the human rights work that I was doing in my city. Plus of course my family, and my son was still growing up and so on. But when I sent this, this also coincided with my husband's stay abroad. He was for one year, he was in England. And I suppose that was the main reason, I just saw this as a kind of a launch pad to go to the UK. So it was not really planned in a particular way and I have been absolutely unplanned (laughs) in my career. I didn't really think that after this I would be doing that and so on. So I went and I stayed for about three months and yes I liked the kind of infrastructure, I liked the facilities there. It gave me a lot of time to sit and just read, reflect and I wrote up my paper there, I gave a seminar. And I came back actually feeling...I came back with fairly enhanced self-esteem (laughs). As I said, here we are in a university, and this again was in the late '90s when the Internet revolution was just beginning in India. So we didn't really have access to computers and things like that. And I think it was the first time in England that I was actually giving emails and so on. And I thought, "Well not bad!" With all these limitations and disadvantages, my seminar was fairly well received. As I said; I came back with enhanced self-esteem.

AR: Sounds like it was very validating, in a way.

VU: And then two years later, again *[I came across]* another advertisement which spoke about an exchange program, this time with Hungary. This was from the University Grants Commission, the funding agency for universities in India. And I was very eager to go to Hungary. I thought, here's an East European country and it had just come out from its socialist curtain and I wanted to see how psychology is studied, taught, practiced and so on. So I went there for I think *[what was a]* three-week program and actually I came back pretty disappointed. The kind of research most of them were doing, maybe it so happened that the department I went to was like this, it was actually on experimental hypnosis. So I didn't have anything to do with experimental hypnosis (laughs). But then I had some conversations with the social psychology department people there and that was great. I enjoyed that and I also found, I spoke to quite a

cross-section of people there, and also found that levels of violence against women were also pretty high. So these are some of the things I learned. But it was a short stay, three weeks and I came back.

And after that was the Fulbright [*program*] and again for the Fulbright I particularly chose a Southern state [*of the United States*] because I deliberately wanted to see how it was there. And since I had this association with human rights, I wanted to see the land of Martin Luther King and what civil rights meant to the history of American people. But I'm quite engrossed in my work in India. I look towards these opportunities to come abroad just to sort of recharge myself, but in any day I would prefer to be in my own society, in my own country.

AR: Well tell us, you spent the first part of your career at the University of Andhra, but now you find yourself, you are now at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Can you tell us about that transition?

VU: As I said, the dissatisfaction with academic psychology had been there for a very long time. As I'd mentioned to you on several occasions this whole emphasis on the individual, psychology being celebrated as a science of the individual, was somehow a little disconcerting to me. I found [*myself*] to be more allied with feminism, or feminisms, because of its political goals, because of its emphasis on social justice, social change, which I didn't really find in academic psychology.

So though I was doing this kind of work, the work culture, the working environment I found myself in in my earlier university wasn't really conducive in the sense that the reception I got from most of my colleagues was: "Oh, you don't really do psychology, you're not really a psychologist. You do women's studies." I didn't really mind that (laughs), but somehow then if I'm not doing psychology then why should I be in a psychology department?; that was the kind of reaction I used to have. So in 2007 I actually went on a sabbatical to an institute called Centre for Economic and Social Studies in Hyderabad. That was really a time I really enjoyed myself those three years. It provided me tremendous space, the flexibility to pursue what I wanted to do. That was also the time I did this project for ICRW (International Centre for Research on Women) on trafficking and that was again a big eye opener for me because I didn't really know much about trafficking. It was [*a*] fairly engrossing kind of a research project that I did for them.

So after three years I had to go back to the university which I didn't like at all, so I was actually looking for ways to leave the university. Then I got this opportunity from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. I knew one of their deputy directors who said they were opening campuses in Hyderabad and if I'd be interested to come. So I jumped at the opportunity because this institute is very, very interdisciplinary, cross interdisciplinary, encourages other disciplinary work, so I sort of fit in very well with the larger vision and goals of the Institute. So here I am and I hope to be here for some years.

AR: Good, good! So it's been a good fit so far. Good, good. I'm trying to be mindful of the time but I do have a couple more questions. One of which, I'm hoping you could talk to us a little bit about the state of feminism. I'm trying to think of how to phrase this exactly. Maybe to make it little more focused; the state of feminist psychology in India, you can tell us about the contours of that sub-discipline. Is there any (laughs) beside yourself?

VU: (Laughs). I don't think there is anything called feminist psychology as yet in India but because of political correctness, because of the emphasis on women being everywhere, there is some research going on in India. But I would again be very critical about the kind of research

being done because for almost 20 years or so most of the research has been on work-family balance for women - almost saying that paid employment for women has adverse implications, both for their own wellbeing as well as for the wellbeing of children. This is the kind of trend of *[the] studies [on women in India]*. So the moment you said women, this is the kind of research that *[came to mind]*. But now definitely more women are getting interested in *[psychology]*, but I would say in comparison to other social sciences, we haven't really moved to a higher level of either theorizing or even doing good quality empirical work, a big disappointment to me. So the kind of work that we have done, say for instance on domestic violence or on mental health, it is again people outside of academia. In fact it is very interesting that most of the non-governmental organizations which are interested in issues of women's mental health and so on are doing these studies but academia (in psychology) is not really interested. So is there any discernable feminist psychology as yet in India? I think my answer would be no, but I'm hopeful because currently at the entry level there are a large number of young women in psychology today. Though of course the positions of professors and so on, the majority would be men.

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VU: {5:45} But at the entry level there's a large pool of young women who bring with them their own strengths and with the kind of changes in gender roles that are taking place right now, I'm sure with this kind of consciousness of these women, they would help to frame newer questions. They would be able to ask newer questions that the earlier generation did not ask. So I'm quite hopeful there will be some change particularly in the next ten years or so.

AR: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about in terms of... well anything that I haven't asked you about that you would like to make sure we cover.

VU: I don't know! (Laughs).

AR: We haven't talked about any of the specifics on your work on trafficking. That's asking a lot of you, but can you speak a little bit about that work?

VU: More than that, it was again published, but I would like to speak about two things particularly in terms of future directions. Not future directions, I think it's more to do with "What are the challenges being faced by women in India today?" And I would like to just put it very briefly as first, the huge contradiction between a democratic political system that we have and a hierarchical social order. In fact, the democratic political system which is sort of based on our constitution is an *extremely* egalitarian one. In fact, the Indian constitution is not actually a legislative document; it is a document whose philosophy, vision, goals are all based on democratic ideals of equality, and so on. But, as I said, the contradiction between this democratic political system and the social order, which is so very hierarchical, both in terms of gender as well as in terms of caste and class, I think it's the biggest challenge that we have today.

And the second I would say is that we don't yet know how to deal with equality in interpersonal relationships. And in fact I've had some experience in counseling, particularly when I was heading the Women's Studies Centre at our university. I opened a counseling centre for women where we were addressing multiple needs of women, it was not only psychological; *[but also addressed the needs of women that were]* legal, health *[related]* and so on. I found that most of the clients whom we had, both men and women - in fact, it so happened that though women were the ones initially that were coming in, primarily because of relationship difficulties, we had men

coming in as well – [*were*] dealing with equality in interpersonal relationships, what does it mean to be equal in interpersonal relationships. [*This*] is one of the biggest challenges facing both men and women in India today. And I feel that there is a kind of a mismatch going on between men's roles and women's roles in India today. Because the struggle that women experience in trying to form egalitarian relationships, their struggle is, to use a humanistic term, is actually predicated on authentic existence. Their struggle itself is an authentic existence. For men there is no such thing going on, they are still hooked onto traditional masculinity, which is being the provider, the protector and so on but they don't know how to be sensitive, in particular to women and in interpersonal relationships. So this mismatch is a source of tremendous concern and anxiety. Women are much further ahead in terms of their growth and in terms of their autonomy. But if there is such a gap between men and women, I don't think that spells good things for relationships.

AR: Absolutely.

VU: So these are the two challenges and I'm actually quite keen to work on them and therefore presently a lot of my work is to do with capacity building, [*and*] with gender socialization. In a small way I feel like I'm contributing something to addressing these challenges.

AR: That sounds great. Ok can you tell us a little bit about your work in feminist counseling?

VU: It is something I didn't really again sort of plan to do, feminist counseling, but as I said I had been counseling women and I could sort of relate to the kind of issues they were bringing into counseling, particularly those related to violence, to abuse and so on. And once again I found that any mode of counseling was not really satisfactorily addressing the needs of these women. Then I began to read up on feminist counseling, particularly Judith Worell and Pamela Remer's book *Feminist Perspectives on Therapy*. It was again very, very influential for me in formulating something that would be relevant to women in our context.

Then when I was in Mumbai I did an evaluation for a non-governmental organization which was working on issues of women's mental health. And this was an incredible group of young committed women and I'm very fond of them. They were actually the first, I should say THE first in India to establish a public hospital-based crisis centre for survivors of domestic violence as well as survivors of sexual violence. So I actually, along with another person, both of us did an evaluation of their project in two hospitals in Mumbai. Then we got to talking and we thought "Ok. We have The Domestic Violence act now." This was passed in 2005 and the Domestic Violence Act in India for the first time provides for civil remedies along with treating domestic violence as a crime. It also provides for counselors under the act. So the question that we [*used in our evaluation was*]; what kind of counseling are these people doing? So we thought that if we're able to have or start brief training programs for those who are practicing counseling either at [*clinics or at*] what is known as special cells (which are part of police stations that deal with cases of domestic violence), it would be a worthwhile attempt.

So along with this organization called CEHAT, *cehat* also incidentally means health in Hindi but it stands for Centre for Allied Health and Related Themes, so it's an acronym. Along with CEHAT and the institute I belong too, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, we actually started the first ever-national course, it was a five-day training course on feminist counseling for domestic violence. So we ran this course twice and we got tremendous [*support*] across the country where we had not only those who were working as counselors in special cells but also students [*taking*

the course]. We had in fact; I think [*during the first run of the*] course, a medical doctor as well as a psychiatrist [*enrolled*]. [*The psychiatrist*] had come for the course because he was eager to know what is going on, what goes on in the name of feminist counseling. Then we actually brought out a book, a volume, I believe this was the first ever such book called *Feminist Counseling for Domestic Violence in India*. This just got published in India one or two months ago. So I feel like feminist counseling is something which addresses my own identification with psychology and as well as [*my affiliation*] with feminism as a political movement. And as I said, it bridges the structural and the personal. It not only validates women's experience, it's not only a non-judgmental way of looking at women's experiences, but it also looks at the broader social context which determines much of women's mental health problems. It sort of re-locates or shifts the focus from the internal and the individual to the societal and the external. At the same time it addresses the individual woman in distress. So I thought, "At last I've arrived home!" (Laughs). I have found something which sort of balances between my identification as a psychologist, because I'm doing counseling and my strong commitment towards feminism and its political goals.

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