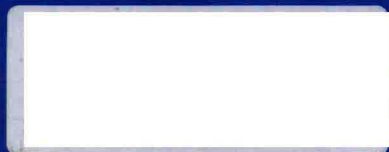


# Feminist Research Methodology

Making meanings of  
meaning-making

Maithree Wickramasinghe

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# **Feminist Research Methodology**

Making meanings of meaning-making

**Maithree Wickramasinghe**

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# Feminist Research Methodology

This book focuses on feminist research methodology, exploring and analysing its constituting methods, theory, ontology, epistemology and ethics and politics, and research issues relating to women, gender and feminism in Sri Lanka. The book examines ways of meaning-making for the political, ideological and ethical purposes of promoting individual and social change, and constructs an example of feminist research praxis.

Using this South Asian country as a case study, the author looks at the means by which researchers in this field inhabit, engage with and represent the multiple realities of women and society in Sri Lanka. In analysing what constitutes feminist research methodology in a transitional country, the book links local research practices with Western feminist approaches, taking into account the commonalities, distinctions and specificities of working in a South Asian context. With an emphasis on general issues and debates in global feminist theory and methodology, the book explores the issues of reflexivity, standpoint, gender, women's agency, empiricism, and feminist politics of Marxism and democracy, positivism, induction, deduction, post-modernism and postcolonialism.

Engaging with and re-conceptualising three traditionally different types of research – women's studies, gender studies and feminist studies – from a methodological perspective, *Feminist Research Methodology* provides a framework for researching feminist issues. Applicable at both a local and global level, this original methodological framework will be of value to researchers working in any context.

**Maithree Wickramasinghe** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Her research has explored feminist critical theory and methodology, gender in organizations and workplaces, as well as women and gender in development.

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### **1 Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry**

*JK Tina Basi*

### **2. Feminist Research Methodology**

Making meanings of meaning-making

*Maithree Wickramasinghe*

**For Ranil who, despite his wisecracks,  
has unswervingly sustained me.**

**For Amma, who was the original source of motivation.**

**For Thatha, who is no longer there to see.**

**For Englanamma, Papa, Maya and Rashmee,  
who laid the foundations.**

**For YPunchiamma, for providing the support services.**

# Abbreviations

CBO	Community-based Organisation
CENWOR	Centre for Women's Research
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CP	Communist Party
CSR	Centre for Society and Religion
FTZs	Free Trade Zones
GM	Gender Mainstreaming
IDPs	Internally Displaced Peoples
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IoE	Institute of Education
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Pakshaya
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SSA	Social Scientists' Association
SLWNGOF	Sri Lanka Women's Non-Governmental Organisations Forum
UNCEDAW	United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
UNIWY	United Nations International Year of Women
UNP	United National Party
WERC	Women's Education and Research Centre
WMC	Women and Media Collective
WR	Women-related

# Acknowledgements

When I told people that I was writing a book on feminist research methodology, I provoked a range of responses. They ranged from a slight blankness at the idea of working on feminism to the boredom of working on methodology; from a straightforward grasp of method to the incomprehension of obscurity. Further clarification on my part was required as to what constitutes feminist research methodology.

This is the very reason for my book, since it is my intention to engage with / conceptualise the complexities of the act of research. Many people have inspired, influenced, excited, assisted, supported and promoted me during this project. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for their support and contributions over the last few years. In particular, I would like to place on record the intellectual contributions of my respondents: researchers of women-related (WR) issues in Sri Lanka. Despite their initial diffidence about their capacity to contribute to the topic, it is their acquiescence and generous donation of time, experiences and intellectual capital that forms the foundation of my work. Though political and ethical considerations prevent individual acknowledgement, they know who they are. Many thanks.

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'Imported or indigenous knowledges? Feminist ontological / epistemological politics' (2007) published in N. de Mel and S. Thiruchandran (eds), *At the Cutting Edge – Essays in Honour of Kumari Jayawardena*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, has also been included in the book as well as a revised version of my article 'Theorizing the self in writing up research' to be published in the *Journal of the Faculty of Humanities*, University of Kelaniya. An adaptation of my paper 'The possibilities and challenges of postcolonial situatedness, standpoints and intersectionality' (2008) presented at the *Conference on Sri Lankan Creative Writing in English* organised by the Women's Education and Research Centre, Sri Lanka is also included in the book.

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Maithree Wickramasinghe  
August 2009

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# Introduction

## Making meanings

### **An introduction to the genesis of the book**

This book aims to look at the ways and means by which Sri Lankan feminist activist researchers inhabit, engage with, represent and construct the multiple realities of women and society through research. In particular, it explores ways of meaning-making for the political, ideological and ethical purposes of promoting individual and social change. However, it does so with the understanding that the possibility of representing and constructing complete knowledge of realities is highly problematic and debatable; and that the ultimate aim of social transformation is equally incomplete and relative. Given the play of subjectivity and human capacity, knowledge can only be partial and situated, rather than transcendent (Haraway 1988), and social action conditional and pragmatic. The following sections of the Introduction will acquaint the readers with its topic and structure, give definitions of concepts and terms, and provide rationales for the book. As introductions from a modernist perspective,<sup>1</sup> they will presume to offer a formal beginning to the book and an epistemic construction of my assumptions; while from post-modern<sup>2</sup> perspectives, they will construe fragments of my understandings, subjective positionings and hegemonic authority.

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, interest in women's rights and issues came to a head with the institution of the United Nations International Year of Women (1975) and the United Nations Decade of Women (1975–1985). Since then, WR research has boomed in many disciplinary directions, encompassing various interdisciplinary subjects. Yet, on the whole there has been little research that has looked specifically at research methodology in Sri Lanka (for instance, at how Sri Lankan realities are represented / constructed in research; or at the theories or ethics of knowledge and meaning-making). An overview of WR research literature indicated that there were a few, sporadic exceptions (see Goonatilake 1985; Wanasundera 1995). These problematised aspects of research methodology per se, such as using feminist frameworks (de Alwis 1994b; Bandarage 1998; de Alwis 2004a; Emmanuel 2006) or participatory methods (Schrijvers 1996; Jayatilaka 1998); or constructing a women's archive from memories and testimonies (de Mel 2007).