

Reproductive Rights Oral History Project

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)
Geneva, Switzerland

T.K. Sundari Ravindran

Interviewed by
Nicole Bourbonnais

July 13, 14, and 15, 2021
Online via Zoom

Background:

In September 1992, women’s health advocates from around the world gathered together to prepare for the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. Together, they agreed on the need for a strong positive statement by women to help set the agenda for ICPD 1994, one that would challenge the existing population agenda and reorient it around the concept of reproductive health and rights. The result was the “[Women’s Declaration on Population Policies](#),” signed by 2,539 individuals and organizations from over 110 countries. This was followed in 1994 by the more expansive “Rio Statement” on Reproductive Health and Justice, produced after a meeting of 215 women from 79 countries in Rio de Janeiro in January 1994. Together, these documents outlined a thorough critique of the status quo in population policies, outlining the fundamental ethical principles and necessary conditions needed to ensure a woman-centered, rights-focused approach. They played a powerful role in shaping the Programme of Action established at Cairo in 1994, as well as the rise of the global reproductive rights movement more broadly.

This oral history project traces the life histories of key activists who were involved in these activities, exploring how their broader trajectory/life experiences shaped their role in the reproductive rights movement and their activism more broadly. The interviews thus provide material of broad relevance to those interested in histories of population control, reproductive rights, feminism, global health, development, and international activism.

Narrator:

TK Sundari Ravindran is currently a Senior Editor of the international journal *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, and Principal Visiting Fellow at the United Nations University

International Institute for Global Health. She holds a Ph.D in Applied Economics and served for twenty years as Professor of Public Health in the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies, Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology, Trivandrum.

Sundari's research interests include inequities in health, with a focus on gender-based inequities, sexual and reproductive health and rights, political economy of health and health systems research. She has been a researcher and an activist, and a trainer working at the local and international levels for close to four decades. Sundari is a founder Member of Rural Women's Social Education Centre (RUWSEC), a grassroots women's health organisation in Tamil Nadu, and has been involved in the organisation's activities in various capacities for forty years, since its inception in 1981. She is also a founder-member of CommonHealth, a National Coalition for Reproductive Health and Safe abortion (India).

Interviewer:

Nicole Bourbonnais is an Associate Professor of International History and Politics at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Her research explores the history of sex, reproduction, motherhood and the family in transnational historical perspective. She is author of *Birth Control in the Decolonizing Caribbean: Reproductive Politics and Practice on Four Islands, 1930-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Format

3.mp3 audio files: (1) July 13, 2021 – 1:06:52; (2) July 14, 2021 – 1:03:38, (3) July 15, 2021 – 37:03.

Transcript:

Initial transcription produced by Otter.ai; edited and reviewed at IHEID. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by T.K. Sundari Ravindran.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Audio recording

Bibliography: Ravindran, T.K. Sundari. Interview by Nicole Bourbonnais. Audio recording, July 13, 14, and 15, 2021. Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: T.K. Sundari Ravindran, interview by Nicole Bourbonnais, audio recording, July 13, 14, and 15, 2021 Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID, interview 2.

Transcript

Bibliography: Ravindran, T.K. Sundari. Interview by Nicole Bourbonnais. Transcript, July 13, 14, and 15, 2021. Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID.

Footnote: Ravindran, T.K. Sundari, interview by Nicole Bourbonnais, transcript, July 13, 14, and 15, 2021, Women's Declaration Oral History Project, IHEID, p10.

T.K. Sundari Ravindran Interview 1/3, July 13, 2021

Nicole Bourbonnais 00:00

So let's get started. I'm really excited to hear about your life and your work and a bit about how your life has influenced your work as well. I wanted to start just by going back to your childhood, to your early life, if you can just tell me a bit about where you grew up, your family, some of the early memories that you have.

TK Sundari Ravindran 00:23

So up to the age of 13, I grew up in Bombay, Mumbai now. My father was working as a chemical engineer in a Soap and Oil Mill of Tatas. And my mother was a homemaker, but she was also educated up to school finals and English educated, which was quite unusual for my generation. So, both educated parents, typical middle-class family. I have two older brothers and I was the youngest and only daughter. Not particularly eventful in terms of childhood, except to say that the major influences in terms of shaping our thinking was my father, who would constantly talk about social justice issues. Where we lived, there used to be a low income, kind of shanty settlement, that we could see from our windows. And, you know, he would kind of point out to us that they were people, they had lives, we had to think of them as, you know - why are they so disadvantaged, and so on. And so, that was one part of it. The other part was also that this was growing up in Bombay, in the 1960s. It was also a time of a lot of political turmoil, I think, poverty was widespread. And the middle classes were also quite affected by the droughts and the wars with Pakistan and Bangladesh, so we would face shortages of food, stuff and so on. So you could say middle class, but you did get exposed to limitations and food supplies and having to adapt to whatever was available and so on. But otherwise, a fairly liberal upbringing in terms of me being a girl. I didn't even think I was in any way different within my household, but I could compare and contrast with my cousins whose freedom was more restricted once they were adolescents and you know, I mean, post-puberty and so on.

So, after that, at age 13, I think, we moved to Chennai. Again, my father had a transfer in his job and took up a job in Madras then, Chennai now. And the city was a major contrast to Bombay in terms of what was expected as good behavior for girls. The kind of clothing we could, you know - I could wear short skirts in Mumbai, but in Chennai, it was long skirts, all covered up. And I rebelled. I didn't like that and so had a bad - fairly bad - reputation as a not a good girl. And not obedient, always answered back, always questioned. One of the things in Chennai [was] taboos around the period of menstruation. And so I remember having to spend some time at my grandparents who lived in Chennai, and having to be excluded in a separate room during menstruation, and I was furious. It didn't seem right. And so those are the kinds of, I would say, influences in childhood about - and also becoming aware of caste distinctions. More in Chennai, because, I think, I am Tamil speaking and this was my kind of native city. But somehow in Bombay, I guess being Tamils in another language speaking city, they're already outsiders, one didn't think about the caste kind of hierarchies and so on. And we belonged to the so called 'upper

castes', and you could see people being treated differently because of their caste. And that was also, I guess, new and unacceptable. So, I would say I had a very strong sense of rights and wrong and things being unfair, even by the time I finished high school.

Nicole Bourbonnais 06:44

Maybe if you can tell me a bit about school, were there any kind of subjects that particularly appealed to you, things you liked or didn't like, in your education.

TK Sundari Ravindran 06:57

Um, up until the time that I was in Mumbai, I went to a neighborhood school, nothing remarkable about it, and very flexible. You know, most people were low income and they weren't, you know – school was generally fun. I didn't feel in any way, you know, pressured. But in Chennai, I was put into a - I would say - more upper middle-class kind of school. And subjects I liked – I mean, I was good at mathematics, and in fact, I went on to do my Master's in mathematics. So I was one of the good students, in terms of studies, but not a popular one, in terms of being obedient and playing by the rules. So I mean nothing beyond that, in terms of – I could say, a healthy skepticism about authority figures, basically. And that continued into university as well. I went to a private, for the first time - Catholic - women's college for my undergrad and stayed in the hostel. It was in college that I got involved in grassroots community work. The college, all colleges, I think, universities, have what you call National Service Scheme, and different colleges take up different projects for improvement of social service-

Nicole Bourbonnais 09:26

Kind of national service projects?

TK Sundari Ravindran 09:30

Yeah. And I think that was - I think I was about 16 around the time and became a part of a group that went every weekend, went to a village where there were also some Catholic sisters living and they were working among the Dalit communities there. I became a part of that group that went and became very involved. I think I was exposed to a village for the very first time, especially Dalit groups, as a community and to see how they lived, as compared to other communities in the same village. We would do some classes for school-going children in special education. Then, I think, we organized excursions for the schoolchildren of that village, to come to Chennai. So this place was about 60-70 kilometers outside, and yet many of these children had never even visited Chennai. I remember putting in a lot of effort to raise money to hire a bus and bring people over and so on. So anyways, there was nothing very social justice oriented, but an exposure to the communities and the way they lived. And some of those experiences had a deep impact, but more from the caste angle than the gender angle. Because there were people who would tell us, "Don't touch us, we are from the untouchable community." And so those kinds of exposures were quite shocking, and they evoked very strong feelings about how people could be dehumanized. And so I think one thing led to the other. We were mainly involved in various groups, other student groups, working in urban communities- urban low income communities - for literacy among children, for out-of-school

education for dropouts, which I got involved in my final years of graduation, and in my master's years.

Nicole Bourbonnais 12:46

You say it wasn't social justice oriented? Do you mean it was a more traditional, charity approach, or..?

TK Sundari Ravindran 12:55

Yeah, so it was like, let's do some good for them. And these children have never done this or that. Let's help them. There wasn't an attempt by the people coordinating that program to make us think about why things were the way they were. Or you know think through, what was it – I mean, there wasn't any discussion on dignity, on human rights, that wasn't there. But I guess the background from which I came made me kind of question things. And I, you know, also being in the hostel I did come across or get acquainted with older women students who were into more radical politics. There was a senior student who had been exposed to Paulo Freire, and I think she spent one year between her graduation and her Master's attending a whole year's program. And so when she came back, she was full of – explaining what it was, and we were all, some of us were really taken up with [it], constantly asking for more, you know, to learn more about it, and so on. So that kind of influenced the out-of-school education projects that I got involved with and a few other students: saying, you know, so what makes sense for these children to learn? And [had] a lot of fun preparing the curriculum.

Nicole Bourbonnais 15:02

And this is in the 60s, 70s?

TK Sundari Ravindran 15:07

I would say 74-5-6-7 because it was also a very volatile time in politics. In India, the extreme left movement, the Maoist movement - then called the Naxalite movement - was at its peak. And students everywhere were questioning the relevance of the education that was being imparted in the universities. We all knew that when we finished our education, employment was not guaranteed. Many people spent years trying to get a job, even after graduation, and even after a master's degree. So student radicalism was everywhere, basically. For everything, there would be some kind of a strike organizing - it was about social justice, it was also about, you know, the meaninglessness of the education that we were getting. There was also critique of education. In addition to Freire, we were exposed to Illich at that time. I remember reading a book called "Pedagogy of the oppressed and the oppressed pedagogy" comparing Freire and Illich.

Nicole Bourbonnais 16:52

And the critiques of education at the time - was it still quite a British colonial style education? Or there was a more nationalist curriculum at that point?

TK Sundari Ravindran 17:11

I wouldn't be able to say about university education because I went into the science stream and you know, I was doing mathematics major with physics and statistics. So that was like everywhere else I think. But in terms of – there was a critique globally, I think, around competitiveness versus cooperation in education, the classist nature of education. What was it preparing you to be? The acceptance of hierarchy that it was inculcating in people and one-up-manship. So those were really exhilarating times to be growing up in because everyday something was happening. Lots of people were doing many interesting things. We met people who were working, who after their master's education even had gone into villages to work and organize for better wages. And there was in Tamil Nadu that time a few groups that were organizing the Dalits to challenge their oppression. And so all these were either interviews or you heard it from other friends or other women students in the hostel and others that we came across in the groups that we worked for for the out-of-school education, and so on. So there were other students, men and women like us in other colleges who thought similarly.

Nicole Bourbonnais 19:29

So was your college women only?

TK Sundari Ravindran 19:32

Yeah, for my graduation. Master's was a mixed college, co-education.

Nicole Bourbonnais 19:44

And at your elementary and high school?

TK Sundari Ravindran 19:48

Those were all coeducation.

Nicole Bourbonnais 19:49

Okay, and it was a Catholic school?

TK Sundari Ravindran 19:54

Catholic school only for under-graduation.

Nicole Bourbonnais 19:59

And was there any kind of religious influence on the curriculum, or..?

TK Sundari Ravindran 20:06

No. In fact, I mean, interestingly, I think this was one of the colleges that was more liberal in terms of, you know, not batting an eyelid if male students from other colleges came to visit the hostellites. Right, not very usual in other places.

Nicole Bourbonnais 20:33

So, what was the name of the university?

TK Sundari Ravindran 20:37

It's a college within the university, Madras University. It is called Stella Marris.

Nicole Bourbonnais 20:43

Okay. And so you've talked about consciousness of caste inequalities in education - do you remember in your undergraduate years, at all, involvement in the women's movement? Or kind of consciousness of that? Or was that something that came later?

TK Sundari Ravindran 21:07

I know that, you know, I wouldn't take any unequal treatment from anybody, but I'm not so sure that I was interpreting it as a gender-based inequality. I think that came soon after, you know. I went off on an interesting trajectory after I finished a Master's in mathematics, which was that there was a – the out-of-school education program that I was a part of, was run by a very charismatic Catholic nun. And she became involved in a National Adult Education Program in 1977-78, I think, maybe 78. And so, jobs were being advertised for people to start working in this. So once I finished my Master's in mathematics, I took up a job in the State Resource Center for that service, this program. And also, I'm getting a bit hazy, but I know that right after 1977 I had a job in this State Resource Center for this call for non-formal education. And by 1978, the National Adult Education program was being launched, being piloted in particular places including in Tamil Nadu. And so that was the time we developed a curriculum through the State Resource Center based on applying Paulo Freire's approach for problem based - what do you call it - we would develop the kind of book from a textbook that demonstrated how you had to do that differently in different, you know, [a] context specific [approach]: that you didn't have one book for everybody and how the whole thing had to be done. And in 1978, a village-based pilot program started, I suppose it was in a place not very far from Chennai. And so I started working there. And so that was the National Adult Education Program, a pilot project, part of it 78-79. From the city into our kind of imagined “work with the masses” kind of, yeah. And so it was at the National Adult Education Program that, you know, that's where I was exposed to what women were facing. The women, teachers of the adult education program that we had to – staying with them, in a rural area long term.

But I should fill you in on another bit of the story, which was that during my final year of graduation and my Masters, yes, much of the work that I did in out-of-school education, and my involvement in politics, was with a group of other men and women where I met the person I married later. And so both of us in 19- we married in 1978. And it was in that year that we got married, I think one of the considerations was [that] it would be easier then to be able to leave home and go and live in a village. I was in that program, which was again, you know, it's based on local problems, but it was quite gender blind. It was about the problems of the Dalits, we had keywords that were selected and picked up, you know, so each village had its own set of keywords, and they had to learn, decode it, discuss it, learn and so on. But my exposure, as I said, to gender issues was with the women who became teachers in the Adult Education Program. So – it was our

choice to work only the Dalit hamlets. And we had the freedom to do that - it was a pilot project. We decided that the teachers in the programs will be local men and women from the same community, from the same hamlet. And so, in 1978, most hamlets would have maybe one literate woman, and this was in villages not very far from the capital city of Tamil Nadu. And so there were a handful who had tenth, or seventh or eighth grade, others were fifth grade pass. These became the teachers for the women's groups, and male teachers were selected for the men's groups. But as a woman - married woman - interacting with them, that led me into the entire future track. They imagined that I knew a lot about family planning, and contraception, and the fact of the matter is, I knew little bits, not a whole lot.

It was at that time that one of our friends had traveled to Europe and brought back *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the book from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. And so my first foray into learning about our bodies was with the pictures in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. It was all in English, of course, but I would open the pages, the book – we would look at the pictures, and I would explain what it was about. These very informal, kind of small group meetings of the adult educators in our home where we lived, meaning our home where the two of us lived. And so that went on for awhile, and that also actually brought me in contact with the OBOS group. I wrote to them saying, "Thank you. This is a wonderful book, we are using it in these ways," and this was, I think, very soon after it had been released. They were very excited. And in early '79, I think June-July '79, one of the authors - or one of the members of the collective, and also one of the authors - was passing through, was going to Southeast Asia. And she wrote and asked if she could stop by and visit us and spend about a month with us - Wendy Sanford. And we were very excited and said "yes, please do". And so she came to spend the entire month in our very small house basically, and met with women. The adult educators were very interested. And we even explored the idea of having a Tamil version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which later didn't happen, because we also realized from further discussions in the women's groups and so on, that at that time the level of literacy was so low, that a fat book like that was not going to be useful. So we took material from that, and made these into pamphlets and into other kinds of booklets about: this is my body, this is how sexual intercourse takes place, this is how conception takes place, and so on. But, you know, a few lines on every page work. So that's how I entered this entire "learning about our bodies" kind of track. And it was very powerful.

Because you know, many things came together at once. And I was so convinced about that line of thinking – I remember talking to the adult educator, women, about organizing against cost and against low wages. And sooner or later, some of them said, we feel no control over our lives in any way, what are we going to do, organizing about other things. And that gave me a very powerful understanding of that, you know. Those days, people who were organizing either around class or caste issues said that gender could wait, you know, and that we were not to create chasms within these progressive movements by raising women's issues. But these women taught me that for them, it's all – if they had to get out of the house, they had to be free to get out of the house. And they had to have, you know, a sense of what was happening in their lives. They said they were living, month after month, wondering if they were going to get pregnant. Some women were facing

intimate partner violence, physical violence in very acute ways, some facing sexual violence. And all this got talked about around Our Bodies, Ourselves conversations. But it also helped me understand that all these were interlinked, and you couldn't say this first and that next.

Nicole Bourbonnais 33:53

And so at that time, there is a, of course, national family planning program. Was that touching this area or, or not really?

TK Sundari Ravindran 34:02

Yes, it was. So that was the next background I was going to come to. So this is 1978. And population control is at its peak, absolute peak. And so women were really caught between families and husbands who absolutely prohibited use of contraception and health workers who were literally, you know, hunting prey. Who can I get as target? So it was a target driven population control program. And, I mean, I can now sympathize much more with those health workers. At that time, I was very angry with them, but they were also under pressure. They had to fulfill certain targets, and if they didn't fulfill those targets, they could not- their salaries would be withheld. So, they were, you know, literally not bothered about anything else, the hundreds of problems that these women had, including neonatal deaths. Infant mortality was pretty high, and child mortality was also high. So this was like a "between the devil and the deep sea" kind of situation for the women. Nobody was giving them information that they wanted, so that they could make their choices, and everybody was pushing them in one way or another. And I will also mention here that I had quarrels with the then emerging feminist movements in India also at that time. That was, the feminist movement opposed the population control approach, which I agreed, but in doing so, they also, you know, kind of focused on all the negatives of any method of contraception and making women afraid of using any method at all. So it was like: "why don't you give them the information with all the positives and the negatives, and let them take their own decisions?" And I was always told, "they will not understand that." I thought [it was] a patronizing, matronizing kind of attitude. And so there were others who agreed with me, and I think the difference was that we were all working with communities rather than looking at the problem from a distance. So we felt that there had to be a balance, and not "no to every form of contraception" because it's not all population control.

So this National Adult Education program lasted only about a year because it came in the interim period, immediately after the Emergency, you know, Indira Gandhi was voted out of power. And then there was an alternative government and they brought the National Adult Education Program and they were open to all these kinds of experiments that we were doing, bringing sixth and seventh grade pass teachers to teach and all that. When that government fell, the program slowly petered off. But we continued to stay on there, and two projects were started. One was out-of-school education for children, because during our adult education days, many of the parents were saying, "we appreciate your educating us, but what about our children, they are already out of school." So that was one. Second was – the offshoot of all those discussions with the women was that they wanted rural women's organizations to focus on information to women, not only about

their own health issues, but about their children's health issues, you know, and to be informed consumers of health care, and also to challenge the health system to deliver the care that people needed. Those days immunization was very high in Dalit community. They were able to come to the better off parts of the village and go back and not come to the untouchable so-called areas of the villages. So this was all about education and organizing. We didn't have any money to do any projects. But we started in 1981 with, I mean, we just kept meeting. There were 13 of us: 12 adult educators from 12 villages and myself.

And that's where my international connection, meaning this link to the Our Bodies Ourselves group – they sent an invitation for the International Women and Health Meeting to take place in Geneva in 1981. The Our Bodies Ourselves group sent a notice, not an invitation. So I said "Yes, I'm interested in coming." And then they raised money from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee - it's called UUSC - for me to go to Geneva. There I met with a UUSC person called Elizabeth Coit. And she promised to come down to Tamil Nadu later in the year and check out if some funding could be given for us to move forward in our work. And she came, and from '81 to '91, for 10 years, UUSC gave \$10,000 a year, flat funding for this organization to grow. So the organization was named - the English name - is Rural Women's Social Education Center. I'll send you the link. It's still, 40 years down the line, it's alive.

Nicole Bourbonnais 41:54

Yeah. I saw that actually, when I was doing a bit of background, kind of looking through. What was the relationship like with the UUSC? Did they have any kind of involvement in deciding programming or as you say, was just kind of a flat sum each year?

TK Sundari Ravindran 42:16

It was a flat sum each year. But they took a lot of interest in the way things were being done. And I think they said -- I mean, very unlike the funding partnerships these days, those were in the spirit of feminist partnerships. So if we had committed ourselves to doing something that we didn't deliver, there was more of an inquiry into "what's happening, what went wrong? And how can we set this right? what are the lessons from this?" You know, and moving forward on from that. But from the beginning, this organization has been run by the local women. So the 12 women ran the organization, because in 1983, I came to Geneva, my husband had an internship with the Human Rights Organization there, and so I moved. I had a baby by then. So that some of my colleagues in this rural women's organization - which we call RUWSEC - they were running it. I was in Geneva '83 to '88, but went back every year for about three months. I must say it was very intensively involved in its activities, the organization remained quite small for five years. And then, you know, there was a push to become bigger. And by the time ICPD [the International Conference on Population and Development] came, people were very eager – they were looking for reproductive health organizations, and they were like: we could count them on your fingers in India. And all of us began to get funding. People were reaching out to us to provide funding.

Nicole Bourbonnais 44:44

And so did the organization have a kind of explicit feminist identity or was it more of a, you know, "woman" focused? How would you describe the kind of philosophy?

TK Sundari Ravindran 44:59

I think it had a very explicit feminist outlook, right from the beginning, [a] women centered feminist outlook. But it called itself a Dalit Women's Organization. So, it was also within the first year, you know, before even they formed this organization, the first few years of my interaction with my Dalit women colleagues made it very clear to me that there was no sisterhood there. In terms of: they didn't see me in any way, as part of the sisterhood. They were okay with me, but they didn't think women of upper-class, upper-caste were really like them. And they wanted that acknowledged, and not swept under the carpet as "oh we are all women, we face the same things." They said, "No, we don't face the same things". I mean, gender issues were discussed right from the beginning. If you see – I could share with you, I think some of them are in PDF - the very first kind of training workshop in 1981, when we were forming the organization, already talks about poverty, caste and gender.

Nicole Bourbonnais 46:29

Yeah, that would be great to see some of those, any documents if you have them around. So by this point, you've now I guess strayed a bit from math. So did you still - I know you later went on to do a PhD in Economics.

TK Sundari Ravindran 46:50

I did it all, during all this time. So my PhD was again '79 to '83, since the subject of my study was the role of caste in the rural labor market. And since my field area was also where my organization was, I could happily be in the field and make, once in a while, visits to my Centre for Development Studies, and still complete my PhD. So I submitted my PhD in '83, and moved to Geneva, so that was... I was raising a baby, I was running an organization, and also doing my PhD. [Unclear].

Nicole Bourbonnais 48:03

What made you want to go back to do the PhD? Do you remember?

TK Sundari Ravindran 48:11

It was what I was observing about caste in the communities. And the whole thing about: people were saying, it was difficult to organize for higher wages for women or for men, because of the caste equations, and how class was divided along caste lines. And that was very intriguing. And at that time, someone we used to know in college was working in the Centre for Development Studies as a staff member, he was like four or five years older than us, but we knew him and he suggested to me that I should take this up as an issue of study, and it would do me good to be exposed to formal courses and to learn to research more systematically. So I did eight months of coursework in Trivandrum and came home by train - it was an overnight train journey - whenever I could manage. That was '79- '80 and from '80 I could be where I was in the community and work on my PhD.

Nicole Bourbonnais 49:45

And was your husband at the time...?

TK Sundari Ravindran 49:48

We worked together. I mean, he was – he helped set up the women's organization and he was running the out-of-school education program for children. But he had also, in the meanwhile, completed a degree in law and [was] practicing in the local courts. So in '82, he won a human rights internship that placed him at the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, and I was waiting to finish my PhD and then join him if he continued, you know. So after his internship, he was inducted as one of their staff members, and I went to Geneva then, which brought me into all the international connections. So in '81, I was in Geneva, for the International Women in Health Meeting and met some of the big names, who continue to be friends even now. So when I went back in '83, I had contacts with ISIS- Geneva, with Jane Cottingham, who used to run ISIS, was the founder of it. Still a very, very close friend. So I did RUWSEC and Geneva both together. From Geneva, I attended the fourth International Women and Health Conference, which took place in Amsterdam, and where the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights was constituted. And I think I got introduced to the terminology of reproductive rights and understood that all the things that we were doing - just quite nebulous, saying, "My body is mine" - that this was the term to call it by. And that brought me in much direct interaction with Marge Berer, with whom also I continue to be associated.

Nicole Bourbonnais 52:25

What was she doing at the time? Do you remember?

TK Sundari Ravindran 52:29

She was running the - what was it called - ICAS? She was in London.

Nicole Bourbonnais 52:38

Okay.

TK Sundari Ravindran 52:38

Running the abortion campaign.

Nicole Bourbonnais 52:43

Right.

TK Sundari Ravindran 52:43

Which she's doing now again. So they were all part of the Amsterdam group, organizing the Women in Health Meeting. But that meeting was the first time that they got really acrimonious, for not being inclusive in its Organizing Committee. So, women of color from Amsterdam, and from elsewhere, stopped the proceedings and challenged the way everybody was being treated as the

same. Specific issues of migrant women in Europe and UK had never been addressed. African-American women from the US joined that. And they said the same was true in the US. And women from the Global South joined that gang and said "reproductive rights is not only about access to abortion, it was also about no to population control." So there was that slogan that time, "no to population control: let women decide."

Nicole Bourbonnais 54:10

And how did you situate yourself within that, within that debate?

TK Sundari Ravindran 54:15

I was one of the rabble-rousers, already, you know. I mean, because there were several women from India, I must say that, but I had the advantage, I guess, of being located in Europe at that time and to continue with these networks subsequently. But the issues, I identified with. And I think it was in 1984 that it became a truly global women's health movement in terms of not just having people come to the meetings, but taking on board the issues and recognizing that reproductive rights could pan out into multiple different things, and depending on the context. The issue of sexual orientation was also raised, but not about gender identity. That wasn't a big issue. But race was, class was, and North-South divides were.

Nicole Bourbonnais 55:26

And at that time, you were also raising a child. Did that influence your view on any of these issues?

TK Sundari Ravindran 55:35

In the sense that at this, and the previous meetings (and this doesn't happen anymore) we could all bring our kids and we demanded and expected childcare to be provided. Nobody is raising these issues anymore. In academia, people are taking for granted that you have a baby, you pay for the baby. No: the baby was paid for. Whoever, you know, if I raised money for my travel, and if I had a 9-to-5, then I took the child with me and childcare was provided. So those kinds of issues of, you know, what it meant to have public services, what it meant for women to have full rights is to have many of these public services guaranteed, for childcare, for free education, for maternity leave for, you know, all those things, began to take shape. I was also more exposed to issues across the globe in those few years, which I wasn't earlier.

Nicole Bourbonnais 56:58

Had you traveled at all before you moved to Geneva, outside of India?

TK Sundari Ravindran 57:04

No. I mean, my first Geneva trip was in '81, as I said, right. And then in '83, I moved to Geneva to join my husband. And in '83, the Unitarian Universalist invited me for the National Meeting in Vancouver. I was a keynote speaker. So that was my first time in Canada. And then from there, we went to the United States. I visited Boston, saw the people from the Our Bodies Ourselves

Group, met with the Unitarians, different people there and came back to Geneva. So that was my first very big round all over. And then was Amsterdam. Next year was Nairobi.

Nicole Bourbonnais 58:12

And what did you do? Did you go to Nairobi, and were you involved in it with the rural women's organization - as representative in that - or on your own account, or..?

TK Sundari Ravindran 58:23

No, on my own account, two of us, another friend from India. So we got somebody to sponsor us our tickets, which was the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Geneva. I used to volunteer for them a few days a week, and so they said, okay, and sponsored two tickets. Then, once in Nairobi, we were accommodated by another women's peace organization, who were very – had a lot of resources. I don't even remember, I think it was called something organization for peace and food or something like that. They had rented an entire house. And so I just had my sleeping bag and slept in the living room, and managed with whatever money I had saved up for my food, and attended the Nairobi conference. And I participated in the launch of DAWN, in which other friends from India were involved. And so I made a contact and I participated in that.

Nicole Bourbonnais 59:49

So in this house, were there other women attending the Nairobi conference there as well?

TK Sundari Ravindran 59:55

Yeah, I mean, there was a – they all had proper rooms and everything. The two of us were free. I mean, we were staying there, not sharing in the costs. So we said, "Just give us some space in the living room and we will sleep in our sleeping bags and be out after morning, having a shower, we'll get out and we'll come back late night, not take up anybody's space." And they were okay with that. So we managed.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:00:31

Camping out at a women's conference.

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:00:33

I think there were many like us, actually, we were all quite thrilled. We attended the NGO forum, we were not invitees to the UN Conference, but it brought first time exposure to women from Africa in such large numbers. And their issues were being highlighted. And so a major learning experience basically, but also a better understanding of how the UN systems, conferences work – some glimpses into that. But in the meanwhile, after 1984 when Women's Global Network had been formed, I think by 1985, they were bringing out a newsletter, and Marge Berer was its editor. And I went once in three months, Geneva to Amsterdam, spent a week or 10 days, I don't know, co-editing the Network newsletter with Berer. So I did that I think '85-'86-'87?

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:02:02

So was that kind of like a precursor to Reproductive Health Matters?

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:02:07

Yes, it was. I mean this was really a Network newsletter and women would write in and, of course, you had to prod them to send in their experiences and contribute to the newsletter, you know, about "this is what we are doing, this is how this is happening," and so on.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:02:33

I wonder if those might be in archive somewhere, they would be interesting to read, I'm sure.

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:02:38

I have some very early issues. But you know, they may have the archives. I don't know if they have digitally archived it. And in the 1981 conference, ISIS used to bring out the newsletters, which talk about the conferences, International Women in Health Meetings and other developments. I have the odd issue here, excerpts of where I have written something.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:03:21

And do you have any other memories of Nairobi? Were there similar tensions as at the International Women's Health meetings?

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:03:30

No, what was striking was there was the feminist groups, and there was the charity groups, and there would be – so anybody who worked on women was there. And there was also the international NGO groups working for women. So that was what I found interesting. The other thing that we found interesting, some of us critiqued it as well, was how it did not link up with, enough, with the local women's groups. So the local women's groups were showcased, you know - there were times when we were bussed to see Group X or Y. But their voices were missing, even in the NGO forum. And some of them, when we went to visit their group, said that and then that you know, we raised it back, saying: what's happening? And the other thing very interesting was that in this house where they had very kindly allowed us to stay for the conference, all the cooking and cleaning were being done by local Kenyan girls who were asking us about: what is this conference happening? You know, I mean, it's like – that was quite a contrast too. That here we are feminists, and there was no relationship with other women working in that house. And, I mean, it seemed quite ironic that it wasn't real sisterhood in a way, and there was that class divide. Coming from where I was I could see some of my friends from India, similar backgrounds also, you know, raise such issues. So those are some memories. But very long ago. I don't really know that much about DAWN except that I was there. Yeah, I didn't play an active role in it. I translated DAWN's first -- a summary of the DAWN publication that came out in Nairobi in Tamil because that was a very powerful document. But I wasn't a part of DAWN. I just remember it as a key moment in the history of the women's movement. Again, asserting Third World Women's voices. So that was happening in the reproductive health bits, as well as in other, you know, the economics and the other domains. Okay, Nicole.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:06:48

Okay. Well, thank you so much.

T.K. Sundari Ravindran Interview 2/3, July 14, 2021

Nicole Bourbonnais 00:00

So this is the second interview with T.K. Sundari Ravindran, on July 14, 2021. So yesterday, we had left off having talked a bit about your childhood, education. We left off with the Nairobi women's conference and your time in Geneva. Before we move forward, I just wanted to see if there was anything else you wanted to add, from what we discussed yesterday.

TK Sundari Ravindran 00:09

Yeah, just a couple of things before we move forward from there. One was that from 1983 onwards, I started working - I mean, doing consultancies - for WHO. They were on and off. So in 1983, I was in a consultancy on women's organizations and their role in family planning. And then 84'-85', I worked on a paper called "Health Implications of Sex Discrimination in Childhood," which got published in 1986. But, I mean, it was formally done by 1984. And I continued and both these trajectories came together around 1987. I was doing consultancies with WHO, I was also co-editing the global network- Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights - newsletter. And in both places, we were working on maternal mortality issues. So, just to say that there were points of convergence in multiple directions. That was one point I wanted to add. And the other was that another very significant influence on my thinking is Leslie Doyle's work. And that was even before coming to Geneva, working with women. What guided my thinking was her political economy of health, in addition to Our Bodies Ourselves, which is not that political, if I may say so. You know, so it goes. All women experiencing this. So just that.

Nicole Bourbonnais 02:25

And when you were doing your research with the WHO, was it from the viewpoint of economics, or was it...?

TK Sundari Ravindran 02:33

No, they were interested in my profile because I had been working with the grassroots women's organization. And I mean, it was purely by accident. I had given my CV there, because I was looking for something flexible to do. And there was a consultant that they had hired to do this paper on women's organizations and family planning, [who] stood them down. And so within a week, they needed something written. And very - what do you call it? - without thinking, I mean. I needed something. You know, I wanted, I was looking for some paid work. So I jumped into that. And I think one thing led to the other and I, till the time I was in Geneva - which was still in 1988 - I kept doing multiple projects for WHO, which actually gave me the technical grounding I needed to work on sexual reproductive health. Because it gave me opportunities to do desk research more as a research assistant type, you know, pulling things together. And it was fun, it was great to get paid to sit and read and educate myself.

Nicole Bourbonnais 04:11

And what was the WHO like at the time in terms of their approach to reproductive health issues?

TK Sundari Ravindran 04:18

Reproductive health was not on the map at all. There was one person within the Family Health Division, who had been hired to work on women's health. And within – after I finished this project on women's organizations and primary health care - sorry, on family planning - within a few months she left. And so it was a Family Health Division, and I started working with a person who then wanted me to work on sex discrimination and childhood, more to counter the pressure that was coming, I think, to focus exclusively on FGM. You know, so they were saying this is not the only issue, there are other issues, you know, of [unclear] and I was interested in data work. So I undertook that and then started working on maternal health issues, because that was the work available, but I was interested in that as well.

So I pulled together volumes of publications on maternal mortality and causes of maternal death globally. And then, I think it came out as a global factbook on maternal mortality, with my name acknowledged inside for, you know, all the work done, but that gave me a very good grounding on maternal health issues globally. What was the data, what was available, what wasn't? What was the issues with the measurements? I mean, coming from mathematics, that was also something I felt interested in. And being there, I had access to the fantastic library, and I read and read, to inform myself, for the global networks, co-editing the newsletter kind of work, which I did off and on, once in three months, kind of thing. So that was, for me, a golden opportunity. And I was surrounded by people who could clarify my doubts, who were very well informed and were the experts in the field. And they were kind, but gender was not anywhere there. And even maternal health, interestingly, came on the map in 1987, in a big way, although the person I was working for had been working on it for many, many years. The Safe Motherhood Initiative came up in 1987. And my insider view was that was because of the Nixon administration's unwillingness to fund family planning, in and of itself. So there was strategizing across various UN and World Bank kind of agencies, to position family planning within safe motherhood. And a person who was working for maybe a decade in obscurity, suddenly was at the center of it all because she knew best, you know. So I got involved also in the preparations for the Nairobi Safe Motherhood Conference and things like that. So just an aside.

Nicole Bourbonnais 08:28

Yeah, that's interesting, though. So it kind of shifts from being a family health, family planning, to safe motherhood.

TK Sundari Ravindran 08:37

This is my reading of it. It's not written anywhere, definitely. But I do know that in 1984-85, she was still working on safe motherhood issues or maternal health issues in a vague way, with very limited funding, and not really taken notice of. While in '86-'87 she's at center stage, and there's a lot of money to do things. So it was very interesting to observe the politics of what gets priority at what time in the world, like, it was not until the Beijing conference in 1995, and after the Cairo and before the Beijing conference, that WHO really had a women's health kind of focus.

Nicole Bourbonnais 09:31

So it would have been the individual -- before that, kind of individual projects or work, but not a programmatic priority?

TK Sundari Ravindran 09:40

But even in '94, when they brought in, it was a one-person unit.

Nicole Bourbonnais 09:44

Okay.

TK Sundari Ravindran 09:45

Claudia Garcia Moreno took charge and did all the work and, you know, single handedly made many things happen for many years subsequently. But that was 10 years after, I had, you know, watched what was happening in WHO.

Nicole Bourbonnais 10:09

So after Geneva-- so you were in Geneva, I think you said until the late 80s?

TK Sundari Ravindran 10:14

'88

Nicole Bourbonnais 10:16

And then where from there?

TK Sundari Ravindran 10:17

I went back to Trivandrum, to the Center for Development Studies as a faculty member. I was not particularly -- I mean, I could have stayed on in Geneva, one contract after the other. My last year, '87 to '88, I actually had an annual contract, which many people, you know, it's good enough for many people, in the sense that a lot of the staff are on annual contracts. There are very few permanent positions, even today, because permanent positions come from core budgets. And so, I mean, I didn't see myself growing there. I felt that, first of all, I was interested in writing, researching and publishing, and then WHO -- now, things are slightly different -- but then, nothing you wrote would go in your name, it was always in WHO's name. And also, nothing you wrote could go without everybody's vetting. And so your voice will never be heard. So I didn't -- I mean, people thought was crazy. But I thought that was the best. And also, I didn't fancy being an immigrant in Switzerland, you know what I mean, for the rest of my life, that's not what I wanted to do with my life. So I went back. There was RUWSEC, I had learned so much, I had such a huge network of people now that I knew that so much more could be done in rural areas, which was not very far from Trivandrum, it was an overnight train journey. And I could go once a month, you know, spend a long weekend to work there. So, for all those reasons.

And also an opportunity came up in Center for Development Studies, which allowed me to shift academically to population and health. Because I don't have academic qualifications, either in population or in public health. They were starting a UNFPA-funded international training program on population and development, and were looking for people to teach two courses. One was called Women, Population and Development. And another was, I think, Population Policies and Family Planning Programs. And I thought this would secure me kind of an academic profile, and get me recognition as a person from the field, rather than as an outsider, kind of doing odd things in the area. But I also realized that that was the time - I think from the time I was about 33, I think - I thought that was the time to spend in-country, learning, being an activist and researching. And I'd become very interested in writing more, thanks to Marge Berer actually, who absolutely honed the way I wrote. Everything I wrote, I would show her and she would tear it apart and get me to put it back together. I learned a lot of things, working with her in those co-editing phases.

But one of the big things that happened in 1987, in the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, which later led to the Reproductive Health Matters, was that we launched a campaign on maternal mortality. That's how the interest [came] in the Nairobi Safe Motherhood [Conference] and this kind of came together, as I said. So it was a global campaign on maternal mortality, ending - I mean, reducing - maternal mortality from a feminist perspective. And May 28 was declared as Day of Action for Women's Health. And that continues even now, 28 May, from 1987 on, became the Day of Action. So in preparation for that campaign, we called for papers and we also wrote a lot of papers ourselves, both Marge and I, on maternal mortality and other maternal health issues. And how could you, you know, what would the perspective be if you had a rights perspective? And how would it be different from viewing it purely from a clinical, high risk, production angle, and so on? So, that was a big turning point in the women's health movement, I think, because concrete issues that were beyond abortion were being taken up that was of interest globally to women across various countries.

Nicole Bourbonnais 16:50

And were you able to bring any of that feminist perspective into, first your work in the WHO but then also later in your classes?

TK Sundari Ravindran 17:00

In my classes? Absolutely, yes. And I also continued to publish in the International Journal of Health Services, based on the data that I had collected for the Global Factbook on Maternal Mortality - it was called the 'Untold Stories': how the health system contributes to maternal mortality in developing countries. So I guess, yeah, for many Indian feminists, feminism is never only about gender. And I think there is also a branch of feminism, which says all levels of oppression are part of the feminist perspective. So, for me, the feminist perspective has always been that, and I don't think breaking the glass ceiling is something I get very excited about as the most feminist thing to achieve, basically. So yeah, in my classes, also in my writing. I participated in subsequent international women and health meetings. I was always a speaker in many of those

meetings, expressing my specific opinions. There was a lot of grassroots work, campaigning on maternal health issues, reducing maternal mortality and showing the socio-economic and gender connections that lead women, Dalit women especially, to maternal morbidity and mortality and so on. So, I also published in the next few years, I think I contributed to two books: a chapter each on Dalit children's health and caste-based inequity in child health and caste-based inequity in women's health. And we started talking about what would be a woman's perspective on population policies.

Nicole Bourbonnais 19:55

When you say “we” there – are you thinking about the women's global network or other colleagues in India as well?

TK Sundari Ravindran 20:05

So talking about women's perspectives and population policy was with Marge, basically, because I was critiquing what was happening in India. Although I was quite far off, you know, we were regularly in touch. And so one of the challenges was: would you say no to population policies at all? Would you then say there is a different perspective to population policies? And so we had an opportunity to talk about this. In 1990, I think, in New York at Hunter College, there was a Women's Studies Conference. I don't know, I don't quite remember. But it was quite a pathbreaking one for sexual and reproductive health, per se, because Rosalind Petchesky convened that meeting. I think Ros knew Marge, and so I got invited to speak on what would be a different approach to population policy. Marge was also asked to talk about that from a global perspective. And I met Ros Petchesky for the first time. I had read her work, which appealed to me. I had read her work just a few years, I think, a year before I met her, and she was the kind of, you know, a good Marxist analysis of abortion, and - it seemed to me like that - it was very exciting, besides Leslie, her perspective on sexual and reproductive health issues. So this was a turning point in many things, and a precursor to the Declaration that you're writing the history of. So both of us spoke, and Joan Dunlop and Adrienne Germain of the International Women's Health Coalition were present at that meeting. And I think they were in touch with many others who were thinking on similar lines, from all of Latin America, some people from Africa. But I remember Joan Dunlop coming up to us and saying, "Is this written anywhere?" And we said, "No." And so: this must be written up, this very important to write it up and it challenges existing notions, and so on and so forth. And she said, "there are many others who think like this."

And so, that was a turning point in two ways. One was, it brought me in touch with IWHC [International Women's Health Coalition], and therefore I got invited to the Brazil meeting. And secondly, it was immediately after this meeting that we started - Marge and I and another friend, Sandra Kabir - started talking about a journal and going beyond newsletters, and engaging in serious evidence-based work. So we were also critiquing a lot of women's organizations writing without an evidence base, exaggerating and therefore creating a situation where women's groups would not be taken seriously, and could not be considered as a good representation around the table when there are scientific discussions happening. So we said, "We can be evidence-based too,"

and we do want to be, but how do we do that with the rights and feminist perspective? And that we needed a journal. Another strand was happening around the same time. And different people, you know - Jane Cottingham had joined; Jane was with ISIS before. And you know, we were always in touch, she was also a very good friend of Marge's. And she was in the then "Family Health" or I don't know, family something division, but under the special program, the HRP, the special program on human reproduction: research, training and development, whatever. And HRP was led by Mahmoud Fathalla, who had a very feminist perspective. And so, Jane started organizing "women-meet-scientists" - women's advocates meeting scientists - meetings in different regions of the world. First, at the time; again, pathbreaking. And that was in '92, there was a regional meeting in Manila, for Asia Pacific, and I spoke in that meeting as well. But there were a lot of other women, health advocates from all over Asia and Pacific, who presented their perspectives to scientists who were working in medical research institutions of countries, to tell them what women were looking for, with contraception, and to say that. My position was that we don't need more contraception, we don't need more technology development. We need available technologies to – I mean, what's already there to be available to women with high quality information, and care, and in a supportive way, you know, and allowing women to choose what they want. So there were many things happening all around the same time. And that's why I think ICPD turned out to be the way it was. It wasn't any one organization, it was many different strands. So I guess those meetings also linked Adrienne to women who were speaking out critically about contraceptive technologies and population control programs everywhere in the world.

Nicole Bourbonnais 28:27

Do you have a sense of, or any guesses as to why this is happening in all these places at the same time? Is it the experience of those working in the field? Is it the mobilization of feminism more generally?

TK Sundari Ravindran 28:45

I think, in many countries, feminists were getting into the system. Very much in Latin America, much more than anywhere else, but also in Europe and in the US. So, they were part of the donor community. They were in government, definitely: many of our Latin American feminists were working in the government. They were in international organizations like UNFPA, WHO and so on, and there was a push. And these were all – that first crop of women in the system were from the feminist movement, they were not gender specialists from the university. So they had links. It's not to say that there shouldn't be gender specialists from the university, but they had links with everybody else and they had also done work on the ground. So many of them had done work on the ground at various levels, you know. They could have included medical professionals as well, who were critiquing that from a feminist perspective and so on. So, they were kind of pushing things. The UN system was anyway doing it's International Women's Decade business, you know, was going on. And so several among them began to think that feminists had not engaged the UN system adequately. And I think one of the people pushing, different people – I think it started with the conference on the environment, I think, in 1992, where they felt that none of the women's issues were being addressed at all, and then prepared for the '93 human rights conference. So

people took leadership. They were well resourced, so not surprising that many were based in the United States. I think Rutgers [was] bringing the gender-based violence dialogue in a big way. So IWHC took the leadership and had the funding to make things move for ICPD.

Nicole Bourbonnais 31:34

So that maybe then brings us to the Women's Declaration and drafting of it. I have in my notes, that there was a meeting in London first and then a meeting in Rio in 1993 [1994], where the drafting took place?

TK Sundari Ravindran 31:51

I was only in Rio, I was not in London, yeah.

Nicole Bourbonnais 31:55

So maybe if you can just describe a bit the experience of drafting the declaration?

TK Sundari Ravindran 32:03

What I remember and I'm really hazy about [it], but I do know that it was intense discussions. There was a draft. I think that draft had come from the London meeting of whoever was able to meet at short notice there. We were also aware that IWHC -and maybe other various other organizations in US - were pressuring UNFPA and Nafis Sadik to take a more feminist perspective. And apparently, they were not that interested in the beginning. But maybe the momentum of the Women's Declaration and seeing the way everything was going, UNFPA decided they better lead rather than be left behind. So the meeting itself, I think, I don't know, three days- four days? I'm unable to remember now. But morning till evening discussing. So [on the] first day, there was some open presentations, I think there was time given to almost all of us, anybody who wanted to speak had about five to ten minutes to present their perspectives on what was wrong with the population policies as they stood now, and what needed to change and how to mobilize. So, there was a free [discussion], we heard from people from different parts of the world. And then I think the draft was circulated and there was careful consideration. And then everybody wanted something taken out, something removed. So they took those kinds of contributions and re-did the draft. And then, you know, there was a push that every line had to be ticked off by everybody. That was pushed from the floor.

Nicole Bourbonnais 34:41

And so was this, you know, 20 women? Hundreds of women?

TK Sundari Ravindran 34:51

Must be 30 to 35. Many more then signed. There were many more women there then, those I saw as signatories. So I know that three or four others from India were there. And so maybe they needed to go back and consult with their organizations before they signed up, and may not have been the initial signatories for those reasons.

Nicole Bourbonnais 35:25

Interesting. Do you remember any of the particular points of debate or contention?

TK Sundari Ravindran 35:37

The one I remember was the one I got pulled up for, basically, which was about: "could we work with the government on changing policies?" And this was, you know, immediately after things have changed in South Africa. So I remember making a statement that if Nelson Mandela could talk and share the Nobel Peace Prize with, you know, somebody who had been upholding the apartheid regime, I didn't see why this was not a time for dialogue, and that government, or at least healthcare providers, were not a monolith. And I also remember saying that feminists should strategize in such a way, that we don't see those demonstrating on the streets as opposed to those sitting around the table, but that people demonstrating on the streets were necessary to force the status quo, to invite us to the table. So instead of, you know, fighting over, which is better, we should do both. And there were people who were good at strategizing for mobilizing, and demonstrations and so on, and there were others who were very good at talking to the status quo. And also, the activists on the ground would hold the negotiators accountable and, prevent, or at least dampen, the possibilities of co-optation, basically, if co-optation was the worry. So, if you thought [of] them as enemies, then they could get co-opted anyway. This was not very well received by some of my Indian colleagues who then took the floor. And also in the group, there were those who said, what are we doing, talking to the UN anyway? This is the status quo, what's the point of it all, and we will only get co-opted. So nevertheless, you know, whatever their issues were, finally they felt comfortable that they had been addressed in the declaration. And there was – no, this was not a majority voted declaration, it was a consensus declaration. And I think very consciously, IWHC had invited people of all hues, totally "anti-technology, no to any contraceptives" groups to people who were scientists and developing contraceptives, maybe – I mean, it's that kind of range. People inside the system, totally opposed to the system, those who were inside and out, those who were in academia: all groups were there. And therefore, we're not really on the same page all the time, but we could find an acceptable middle ground.

Nicole Bourbonnais 39:24

And was it a lot of the same people who had been at previous International Women's Health conferences?

TK Sundari Ravindran 39:30

Quite a bit. Quite a lot of them. But there were also others, you know.

Nicole Bourbonnais 39:36

And did you find any of the tensions from some of those earlier conferences around geography - kind of North-South - did those come up as well?

TK Sundari Ravindran 39:48

No, the north-south didn't come up as much because by the time – by 1993-'94, you know, the Women's Health movement was really – the meetings had taken place all over the globe, it was not dominated by any one region. So I don't think there was that kind of [tension]. There were still tensions about, "are you only taking up reproductive health issues, or all other gender and health issues?" That was an issue being brought up here. And I remember that from Asia, about: "are you again reducing women to their homes by paying so much attention to reproductive health and rights as core to women's empowerment and gender equality?" And the counter argument was, "no," the focus was because this was the kind of last bastion that even when women got educated and got into politics, what was very difficult to achieve was sexual and reproductive rights. And therefore, it was strategic to focus on that, and if we blew that out, other things could be much simpler. And that there was never the weight of the state, and the Vatican and the other religions against tuberculosis, or malaria. That was the weight of all that against, you know, homosexuality, about contraception, abortion, so on. So, both – the arguments went back and forth. But it was very useful for many of us, because we knew how to counter if the same arguments came up elsewhere, how we could counter that, you know, and why was it so central? Me, personally, I was very convinced. And there was another argument, that it was a Western agenda that, you know, these women were coming from the abortion movement, and that's why. But given my background, and my introduction to reproductive rights – it was not from anybody else, but from the women on the ground. So I was very convinced that this is actually a local agenda that was getting global recognition. In '93 we also started Reproductive Health Matters.

Nicole Bourbonnais 42:43

Anything else you remember from of that year, [on the] Women's Declaration?

TK Sundari Ravindran 42:53

Too much was happening. For example, in many countries, and India was no exception, UNFPA was funding networks of grassroots organizations to consult with local women about what is it that they saw as an alternative to the existing population control policies. So I was quite centrally involved in convening one in Tamil Nadu with RUWSEC as the center, but also helped, you know, organizing elsewhere and also pulling all the different meetings, the reports of the different meetings, together into one document for UNFPA in India. And that kind of got me into the NGO delegation for ICPD in 1994, so it was a very busy time within India. It was also a time when RHM [Reproductive Health Matters] started. And I joined Marge as co-editor, we floated the first editorial advisory meeting in 1993, June-July, I think, and the first issue came out in '93, and it was on population.

Nicole Bourbonnais 44:32

And this is also the preparatory years for Cairo. So you were on the NGO delegation. Do you remember?

TK Sundari Ravindran 44:43

Only to Cairo. I didn't go to any of the regional meetings.

Nicole Bourbonnais 44:46

Okay.

TK Sundari Ravindran 44:48

I only – I went to meetings within India, where local women's voices were. We worked, and it was being documented, and then I went to the ICPD conference.

Nicole Bourbonnais 45:10

So maybe if you can tell me a bit about that experience?

TK Sundari Ravindran 45:13

ICPD was, again – there was a government conference happening, and some feminists. I think there had been funding provided. In the Women's Declaration Meeting, there was some strategizing about who could get into government-led delegations, and in which countries would that be possible. So there were many from the Women's Declaration group who were in government delegations sitting in the UN Conference. And then there was the NGO conference. But you're probably aware that for the first time, feminist groups were talking to organizations like the Population Council, and so on. We had considered them enemies till then, but they were reaching out to women's groups. And that was because of the very, very negative situation basically on population till the Clinton administration came in. So the meeting itself happened. Hillary Clinton was one of the guests for the ICPD conference. But that was, August-September, I think. But July-August, whatever, whenever it took place, till the December of the previous year, it was the, I don't know, Bush administration, I guess, it was a Republican government, no funding to family planning. And also very strong Vatican and Islamic positions against contraception.

So I think there were also changes in strategizing by what we consider traditionally population - or demographers' - groups, who reached out to many women's groups, and tried to position themselves as reproductive health people. So I remember that in ICPD, when they came, a lot of them were stunned that – this was like a women's conference. This was supposed to be a population conference. And it had been their territory, till 1984. But in 1994, suddenly, they were like 5000-plus women from various women's groups, all over the place. Talking, taking the whole scene over like it was a women's conference. So that left quite an impression that they were wondering, I mean, what happened to all these women? I mean, how come they have this much ownership on this? Never seen them, they're not demographers. And we were saying: what do these guys know about reproductive health and rights? They've only been calculating numbers so far. You know, what's the fertility rate and mortality and migration. Now you're champions of women's reproductive rights? But they were reaching out. They had money for research, they were interested in looking at gender dimensions of various things. So I think in the subsequent years, there was also I think – they were employing feminists in their organizations, so that they would not be seen as only demographers. So their language changed, as well.

But I spent most of my time in the Reproductive Health Matters booth, introducing the new journal, talking to people. You know, getting new subscribers – that was one of my main preoccupations through that. Another distinct memory is that there was some kind of a stadium place near where the conference was happening. And very early every morning, around breakfast time, those who were part of the government delegations, feminists part of the government delegations, would come there, and any of us who wanted to be there could be there. So they would kind of brief us on what went on the previous day, and also take feedback on any very strong feelings about what was bracketed, what they could negotiate on, what was absolutely a no-no, you know, that kind of thing. So there was actually – I don't remember any other conference like that where that kind of feedback was taken and fed actively.

Nicole Bourbonnais 50:57

Yeah, kind of in real time back and forth. And in those meetings, do you remember any of the tensions or key points of debate?

TK Sundari Ravindran 51:13

No, I - maybe, if I do, I may be telescoping. But it was around the language of abortion, I think. And the other was, I think there was general consensus, I remember agreeing that we didn't have to mention sexual and reproductive, but that we would fold the sexual health within the reproductive health thing. Which became a point of debate a few years later about the negatives of that. And, of course, there were many negatives with that, but I guess, at that point in time, this was the compromise that if you wanted to get the reproductive health language in, then you know – otherwise you lost the whole thing.

Nicole Bourbonnais 52:07

Right. So as the kind of compromise...

TK Sundari Ravindran 52:12

One other - suddenly comes to memory - one of the very important ones was those pointing out that the declaration - I mean, the ICPD platform of action - was not questioning the exploitative, global economic system, and that it was going along as if everything was hunky-dory. And Ros Petchesky later wrote in Reproductive Health Matters about feminist fault lines at ICPD. And how, in order to win the reproductive health language, we had given away – kind of agreed to go along with the private sector interventions with challenging the unequal economic system. Which had been on the feminist agenda, but you know. So for some, it was very much part of the central agenda. So that was seen as a as a big compromise made. And not everybody was convinced about whether it was a good thing or not. And I very soon began to feel that maybe more had been given away. But I wasn't around the table, so difficult for me to judge whether that was only for me.

Nicole Bourbonnais 53:56

And then do you remember the kind of atmosphere when the program was approved?

TK Sundari Ravindran 54:06

I think overall it felt like a major achievement. And I don't think, given now, looking back, that everybody is talking reproductive health, it was mainly because it was on the UN document which so many countries signed off on. But has that meant progress and reproductive health? I don't know. But I must say I decided that that would be the last UN Conference I went to. I didn't go to any other because it also felt like after the Beijing – I didn't go to Beijing either. But it also felt like too many feminists were spending too much of their time with the UN rather than at the country level, and definitely, much less at the local levels.

Nicole Bourbonnais 55:08

And why do you think that happened?

TK Sundari Ravindran 55:14

Because of this having been a positive experience. I don't think work at that level is of no importance. I do think it's important. But I think a disproportionate emphasis went there. So much so, over the year - I can speak for India - that at the time of ICPD, and when we were holding all these grassroots consultations, there wasn't that much money for women's health work. But there were many, many groups trying to do many things, between '95 and 2000. There was increased funding for many of our groups, and we grew, including RUWSEC. But within the US liberalisation as well, by the 2000s, a lot of the international population and reproductive health organizations set up shop in India. And they took over the agenda. So, the agenda setting is not happening in consultation with the local groups who have very little money. They're doing, you know – still, there are people working, here and there. But many of them have folded because there was no funding. No, the kind of donors who were giving money wanted to do more cost-effective kind of funding. So, giving \$10,000 to one organization was not – it was too much work for too little to show. So big funding, big conglomerates got funded, and very limited money for feminist reproductive health and rights work. It's going on, but you know, the kind of vibrancy I saw, say 1990 to 2000 or even mid 1980s to 2000 is no longer there, everybody is limping along and surviving. So, everybody who is not connected to or the subsidiary of a well-funded international NGO is struggling for survival basically.

Nicole Bourbonnais 58:20

So, kind of ironically, I guess the achieving international success kind of..

TK Sundari Ravindran 58:27

I mean, this is just personal, you know, personal reflection. I mean, maybe more voices will say the same. Many of us working within India, you know, share a similar thinking on this, but not all.

Nicole Bourbonnais 58:55

And so can you think of, you know – is there a role for international donors? What would it have to look like to be more supportive of this kind of vibrant movement?

TK Sundari Ravindran 59:11

Well, I mean, I think international donors were doing fine before deciding that there need to be country level branches of every organization, registered at the country as a local organization, and having their own operations rather than collaborating and entering into partnerships with those who already exist and help them move forward. But also, money for reproductive health has been going down, even for those big NGOs. So if you talk to them, they are saying, "money is quite limited." Despite not having a Republican administration now and so on, there is much more - because of the COVID situation - much more focus on in-country issues. Internationally, the economy is not doing very great, not only because of COVID, but before then, and already development aid and development aid for women's groups, etc, was coming down like anything. And the big - so that's bilateral donors. And a lot of agenda setting happening by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is not particularly feminist, not rights based.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:01:04

Do you feel that it's reverted back to a kind of family planning, population approach or it's something in between?

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:01:11

I don't even know if it's something in between. There is more work with adolescence. But again, they had just about started mentioning adolescent sexual and reproductive health - this is all India specific - but the moment menstrual hygiene management was mentioned by somebody, now everybody is clutched onto that, because that's absolutely not controversial, you know, in many ways. And you can say you're doing gender work, you know, because you're challenging gender norms. Yes, you are. But you know, very peripherally, not centrally. And none of the family planning work has been gender responsive. So there's been no move in that direction.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:02:13

And so then, from your own kind of trajectory after Cairo, if you can just say a bit about what you've been doing kind of since then?

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:02:25

I did so many different things. So that was Reproductive Health Matters work, there was work in RUWSEC. I started teaching in a public health institute and became a professor. There we started a national coalition called 'Common Health' which is Coalition for Reproductive Health and Safe Abortion. I did some work on health equity and launched a health equity network in India. Okay.

Nicole Bourbonnais 1:03:06

Alright, great. Have a good day then. And I'll see you tomorrow.

TK Sundari Ravindran 1:03:09

Yeah, see you, bye.

T.K. Sundari Ravindran Interview 3/3, July 15, 2021

Nicole Bourbonnais 00:00

Alright, so this is the third interview with T.K. Sundari Ravindran on July 15, 2021. So yesterday we finished by discussing the Cairo conference and some of the changes that have or haven't happened since Cairo. I was wondering first if there was anything you wanted to add from our discussion yesterday?

TK Sundari Ravindran 00:08

No, nothing in particular. Just one clarification, that I was saying that a lot of grassroots groups that have existed are, you know, not receiving the funds that they should be. To add to that, many, for survival, have become - as long as they are part of a project done by a larger NGO - kind of field data collectors, sources of information, or people who will execute what has already been decided at a broader level, and through that, try and fit in some of their own work as well. So, it's not that nothing is happening, but it's that their agenda-setting agency is facing very critical challenges, you know, because of the resource constraints. So just to say that. And it's fascinating: the numbers of groups that are even today, all over the place, and the very interesting things that they do with money, without money.

Nicole Bourbonnais 01:58

And this is something I've been hearing a lot about the kind of top-down agenda setting in the industry. But I wonder whether you still see the population control mentality surviving post Cairo? Do you see a significant shift in the rhetoric?

TK Sundari Ravindran 02:24

In India, there was a significant shift in the rhetoric. And there was a shift in practice in many of the southern states where fertility began to fall, I think, for many other reasons. Availability of family planning was one of them. But there were social movements challenging caste discrimination, there was upward mobility being made possible, there was an increase in women's literacy. And over a period, even in RUWSEC, I saw, you know, that the first 10 or 15 years, we were talking about women's rights to control their fertility and so on. The women who couldn't do much with that information in their own lives (except, you know, have three or four children and then go for sterilization) definitely took action vis a vis their daughters, and we saw big changes in the next generation in terms of curtailing family size, taking decisions...within quite strong boundaries, but definitely greater agency. The availability of family planning helped, but I don't think it was - the population control was not really needed, because there was voluntary [use]. In fact, between '90-'95 and '98, I was part of a large study looking into fertility transition in Tamil Nadu, and my piece of it was women's role in the fertility transition. So many things changed in Tamil Nadu where I was seeing it. [In] Kerala it had already begun to change I think even earlier. But what I constantly heard from colleagues in Northern India was that, there, only the rhetoric changed and that their targets continued to be implemented. And even till very recently, there have been major scandals of sterilization deaths. And over the last week, there's another draconian

two-child policy being announced by the Uttar Pradesh government, with anybody with more than two children not eligible for government jobs, for food subsidies, for any of the programs for low income groups, and so on. So it keeps going back and forth, I think, and every time there is an economic crisis, then it comes back to population control.

But under the current Hindutva regime, the slant is also that the Muslims are having too many children, and so let's make doubly sure that they don't get away. So that angle was not there 40 years, 30 years ago, although population control was very, very, strong and very inhumane in those days. So that's one part of it, growing Hindu fundamentalism, clamping down on reproductive rights in many different ways, even as literacy is increasing [and] women are getting assertive. It's a quite volatile situation where women are pushing for more, but various forces - community, the state - are saying "you can go to work, you can be educated, but you cannot take your own decisions about how to dress, who to marry, when to marry, how many children to have." Even abortion, which never used to be a big issue in terms of morality. When I first began my work in the community, abortion was a matter-of-fact thing, not very easily available, because of not enough trained professionals and so on. Now, it's the opposite. There are enough trained professionals, but the discourse around abortion has become very moralistic, and that's due to rise in Hindutva. Therefore, it's like, "Oh, why is it that only the Christians oppose abortion?" as if Hindus don't have any morals. It's one thing leading to the other and it's changed. In a very recent quick situation analysis on abortion stigma that I was part of two years ago, [it] was very shocking for me, you know, that young women did undergo abortion, but felt guilt ridden. They thought they were doing something very wrong. So, it was quite a surprise. That these were way more educated, more economically independent [women from the] same villages - granddaughters almost - of the women I used to originally work with. But in terms of thinking their mothers and grandmothers were saying, "Well, if you have to do it, you have to do it, you know, I mean, what's the right and wrong discussion here?" But that wasn't the case here. So it seems like upward mobility, exposure to various other things has not necessarily been that kind of a linear progress towards better understanding of things or feeling entitlement. I won't say this as uniformly true, but I guess, for me, the expectation was overwhelmingly they would feel entitled. Because these were smart, young women, they were not working in agriculture anymore. They were taking buses and working in little industrial estates that have come up near these villages, in many places. They meet outsiders all the time, exposed to the media and so much more. All villages are electrified. TV is a must in every household, and so on. So I was thinking, what's really happening here, you know, why are things regressing? I guess - but that's the way change happens. I guess it's never linear, it goes back and fourth. And this is not exactly one of the most positive moments in history, I think, globally. So that's part of it.

In terms of my work, I think I worked with Reproductive Health Matters as co-editor only for six years. So it was '93 to '99. By that time, the volume of work in Reproductive Health Matters had begun to explode in those six years, and I wasn't able to work on the other things that I really wanted to do, which was work in the community. But I was also getting more involved in multiple other things. So one: let me just put it as internationally, there were many things that I was

getting involved with. Many of the people who had been on the journey all through. One was a major training initiative, which was started by a group in South Africa, but then became the WHO training course, on transforming health systems. It's called "Gender and rights in reproductive health." So that happened, it was a very intensive, many years long, you know, piloting, modifying – it was a team of seven or eight of us, each of us worked on one module, or two people working on one module, sometimes. We first ran the course in South Africa for a few years, and then disseminated it to five other groups, and then wanted them to test it out in different countries like Argentina, China, Egypt, Australia, and so on. They brought all this stuff back, and then we finalized it into a manual and I was the editor of the manual. So, it's a huge tome. It still exists only in PDF form available on WHO website. So, we were going and you know, running these courses and auditing the courses when it was being run by others, and the manual got published finally in 2001. There was also the fertility transition in Tamil Nadu project happening around the same time. And there was also another research project called "Gender, Reproductive Health, and Population Policies" through the University of Amsterdam: that was again a multi-country project by Philippines, India, one country in Latin America, I think Mexico. I was involved in actually implementing a study on users' perspective on the diaphragm, which was not available in India, but Population Council in India had received some supplies, and I was very keen to try that out.

So I was doing a number of research projects and continued to be on the editorial advisory group for RHM. I've always been on its editorial advisory group for many, many years now, but started getting involved in other things. I also worked in WHO full time between 2001 and 2003, as a Gender and Health Expert. That was the time when the gender policy was adopted. And so that was a lot of evidence building work that I went to do there, on how does gender play out in specific disease areas. It was a very different approach from what any feminist would agree to. But that was the only way in which we could work with the medical community. We had to do "gender and malaria," "gender and tuberculosis," "gender and...", you know. And so for me, again, that was another huge learning curve, because I had this time to sift through all the evidence and put it together in four pages, five pages. So that was a phase, so multiple things happening.

Nicole Bourbonnais 16:23

Yeah, because this kind of came up earlier as well, the difference between, say, a feminist approach and a gender approach? Can you maybe say a bit more about that? How it used to be?

TK Sundari Ravindran 16:34

I wouldn't say feminist approach and gender approach. I think feminists have a gendered approach as well. But, you know, I think in a feminist way of thinking, you wouldn't compartmentalize in very biomedical terms. I mean, health is health, and the physical and the mental and the social are all connected. And so does WHO – it says the same. However, when people are asking you questions about, "So what do I have to do about it?", then all that philosophizing doesn't help. So I have actually moved on to being: "how do you present this in concrete terms?" "How do we help people visualize and take concrete action?" And I've moved very far away from theory...not that I was that well-grounded in it, I've never gone through academic courses, but I've always been more

inclined to the doing. So what changes can we make on the ground? And how will it impact the lives of the women, men who are being affected? I don't know: how you resolve the tensions between these two continues to remain in tension. Because the kind of work I do, on the one hand, is not really – if you take that kind of perspective of, "Is this really a feminist approach or something like that?" I don't think it is, I think it's a compromise approach. But even with that, I keep hearing implementers say, "All this is up in the air, what do I need to do in my clinic?" "So, how does my history taking have to be different? How does my something else have to be different?" I have moved more to that side. I'm more inclined. I find that much more challenging, much more interesting for me, and also much more satisfying to see things change. And therefore [I] started investing much more in developing training modules in India. So any number of training modules on gender and health for NGOs.

And this – I was quite successful in bringing together like-minded colleagues from all over India, from NGOs, from academia, and so on. And we always worked in groups. Any one NGO hosted it, but I would be the initiator in many instances, or somebody else would tell me, "Shouldn't we be doing something?" and I would say, "Hey, why not?" and take the lead and pull the curriculum together. Many people will contribute, but I would finalize it. One was on gender and health for NGOs. One was on gender and mental health with a mental health professional. She was the expert in mental health, but she asked me for help, and we ran these training courses. Another, with another friend - who's [an] activist but also in academia - on gender mainstreaming health research. That was, again, 10, or 15 of us. And then, through the institution, where I joined in 2000, as an adjunct professor. I was in and out of there teaching there regularly, even when I was in Geneva, I would come back and teach my courses. But through them, I was able to implement a project on gender mainstreaming medical education. So again, my role there was – it was a huge team, but my role was in putting together a training curriculum and be the training coordinator for medical educators in different parts of India. And I think one of those trainings was in collaboration with WHO of Southeast Asia region. So there were medical educators from across Southeast Asia, WHO region countries: Thailand, Indonesia, so on. Another course, finally, was on a "gender and rights" perspective to maternal health programming for Indian health managers. So I worked with whoever, wherever there was an opportunity, whoever had the money, and allowed me the freedom to do that. A lot of investment into training, and in working more nationally. But the other big thing was that I was part of the Women and Gender Equity Knowledge Network of WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, and put together a report on what was happening to gender mainstreaming in health. And one of my papers was called The Emperor's New Clothes. That was what was happening in gender mainstreaming and health in 2007, or so.

Nicole Bourbonnais 23:16

So you've been kind of working then on the application of these broad ideas that were developed in the 80s, 90s. And both internationally and nationally. And I wonder if-

TK Sundari Ravindran 23:30

And regionally.

Nicole Bourbonnais 23:31

And regionally. And I wonder if you have any thoughts on some of the advantages and disadvantages of working on the international level versus working on the national level. So, say, the difference between working with the WHO versus working with local or national programs.

TK Sundari Ravindran 23:51

For me, change happens only if you work at the national and local levels. But the advantage of working at the WHO level is to push the normative, the standard setting. And I have begun to appreciate – and I think I've been extremely lucky to have the opportunity to keep crisscrossing across levels. I don't think these opportunities happen to everybody. I have brilliant women all around me, [and] they are not necessarily, some of them opt not to do it. But some of them might want to, but don't seem to have been in the right place at the right time that I seem to have. And it's many of my way older contacts that are still keeping me in the network. So I think work at all three levels is important. And I have begun to appreciate that importance. And I also think not necessarily the same person has to do it, but that anybody at each level would be better off appreciating the linkages. So, I know that when a lot of effort was put into the SDGs, and making sure that reproductive health was on the agenda, I was kind of skeptical, I thought: this is not going to happen. And I played no role at all, I was not anywhere in the international groups or movements working on SDGs. But I saw that it had made a difference, you know, finally, and I was proved wrong, basically. And because it's in the SDGs, it is opening up many more windows for standard setting, definitely. I guess, you know, if we had enough resources at all levels, and not lopsidedly at only some levels, then things would move much faster. Because there are people interested and capable at all those levels.

Nicole Bourbonnais 26:26

And what would you say to the critiques of, say, the SDGs or the international level as being too universalist or not grounded?

TK Sundari Ravindran 26:43

I have always struggled with that. But if you have something at the international level that 179 countries have to sign off on, it has to be the lowest common denominator, I mean, what else can you do? But if that can be, you know, if we don't regress, but keep moving forward there, I think it would make a difference. So, too much emphasis on the UN system [is] not really great. But on the other hand, doing nothing with the UN system and dismantling it is chaos, because then countries are doing exactly what they please and who's going to hold them accountable? You know, when each country is under some kind of an autocratic regime, then there's nobody challenging them. And I think we shouldn't make that mistake again of "a country's sovereignty is supreme and there is nothing that's international that binds." I think we've gone beyond that, I mean, since the Second World War. And I think – I mean, yes, it's a very unequal world. And yes, even in the UN, there's a lot of politics. And my husband actually – I had mentioned that he worked with the International Commission of Jurists, and subsequently he worked in many country level field

stations as a UN human rights person, and, finally, was Director of Human Rights in some of the peacekeeping areas like Sudan, and East Timor, and so on. And I've observed from very close quarters the kind of politics, whose voices are heard. But that's no reason to do away with the human rights structure either, but to put countervailing pressure, I suppose.

Nicole Bourbonnais 29:05

So you were both kind of balancing these international and different levels of work, of activism?

TK Sundari Ravindran 29:13

Yes, for me, it has been very advantageous. Because what's happening at the international level gives you so much more insights and information which then could percolate to the country level. You could bring all that in. So, my approach even to very small projects in the past few years as a consequence is: "What's happening in other countries?" So when we are discussing say, what has to change in abortion laws in India, I immediately start off with how did Country X change its abortion law, who came together, what happened. So I think it's a major advantage to have that kind of evidence base to draw on, and to look at these things. My most recent research project that I completed was as part of United Nations University's International Institute for Global Health, through which you have contacted me. I'm the Principal Visiting Fellow. And the project that we worked on was: what works, where, why, and how, in gender mainstreaming, in health, in UN agencies. And that, again, made me understand the limitations of – you can think that, the UN agency world, they can think that's the entire universe, and what they do is making all the change. It isn't, but it is making changes. So, it's not all of it, it's some of it. And it also brought me – again, made me discover a huge amount of work on the implementation side, which I'm interested in. A huge amount of work has been done by each one of those UN agencies, which I was not aware of, except I came in contact with it as a result of this research. And I'm very excited to be able to take that now in the work that I will be doing locally and nationally in the future.

Nicole Bourbonnais 29:31

That kind of learning from what other people have been doing. So maybe we can come more or less to a close. Just as a last question, first if there's anything else you want to add, if there's any other things that you think are really important to mention, and then maybe just more broadly, how do you view your career and your life as a whole? I mean, what are some of the major highlights for you? Some of the major challenges. We've talked about many of these already. But if there's anything further you want to add.

TK Sundari Ravindran 31:58

So one thing I wanted to add was -- I've been emphasizing how the international and global has influenced thinking nationally and locally. But I also think that it's knowing the local reality that raises, for me, the research questions, the questions that need answering. Why does this persist? How can this be changed? And what matters really on the ground? So I think that is a major anchor: what difference will this make on the ground to this x and y that I know. [This] has been a kind of true north and kept me anchored there. So the kind of tasks I would take on is not just for

intellectual satisfaction – sometimes I do that, but you know, then I keep saying, so what use is all this now? So just to say that it's a two-way thing, it's not just one. Overall, I could say no regrets, in terms of the way I have spent my time. I have done and kind of rushed into things impulsively, taken on things, done things pretty much as I wanted and have been able to do that with full support from family and so on. On the other hand, looking back now more than 40 years, what has changed? I can see small changes. I can see changes in perspective of, as I said, the grand daughters of the women I started working with: very assertive, very different women, [who] have a great sense of entitlement. On the other hand, the larger social realities around them have changed in some ways, and not at all changed in others or regressed in some. And so it's not an easier life for that generation, just because there has been improvement, so-called, in women's status in particular things or even in autonomy. So, it makes me wonder, after all these years, has it been useful? Personally, yes. To the society, I still wonder. Yeah, personally, it has been growth all through. And I love learning and I am still very excited at something new that I can learn that will be of use.

Nicole Bourbonnais 36:11

I think that that actually captures quite well this kind of mix between interest in understanding society, but also kind of pragmatic - how can we actually improve it? - that I can see in in your life. Well, thank you very much, Sundari. This has been really great for me. I really appreciate you taking the time. I know it's a lot of energy. But thank you so much.

TK Sundari Ravindran 36:41

Thank you, Nicole.