In the early 1990s, when the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) was still housed in a small Mumbai apartment, its founding director, C.S. Lakshmi was invited to take part in a consultation on gender and development. After repeatedly hearing recommendations for providing women with sewing machines and encouraging them to grow kitchen gardens, Lakshmi and other activists got up in the break and wrote on the board 'No more sewing machines for the next 25 years!' This did not imply that sewing machines should be re-introduced after that period, but was, rather, an attempt to alter the course of the debate on gender and development. To say we do not want sewing machines and kitchen gardens is to reject the mindset that domesticates women and values them predominantly in terms of how they serve their families and provide care. It is to reject a pre-determined idea of what women are or can be. It is this reduction of women to fixed social or gender roles, which makes it difficult, though all the more crucial in a country like in India, to recognize and support the importance of a women's archives.

When Women's Studies Centres were set up in SNDT Women's University Mumbai (Research Centre for Women's Studies) and in Delhi (Centre for Women's Development Studies), scholars soon realized that the methodologies of research in canonical, male-dominated history writing are inadequate for researching women's lives. Feminist scholars realized early on that documents such as diaries, letters, fictional and non-fictional writings, autobiographies, speeches and memorabilia, all of which were generally considered to be 'soft' (i.e. unreliable) historical sources, were in fact critical to researching women's lives. It meant not merely appending existing history books with a chapter on women, but rethinking the terms along which history is written. This necessitated finding means of generating, preserving and communicating knowledge from women's history and experiences.
The Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women was established in 1988 as an autonomous national archive for women, the first venture of its kind in the country. Its collection includes a range of resources, from newspaper and journal articles, books, pamphlets, brochures and posters, to oral history recordings, photographs and video documentation. The major thrust of its activities has been in the area of education and raising awareness. SPARROW approaches the task of archiving not just as a documentation centre, but as an active agent in bringing women together for discussion and in utilizing alternative ways to educate people (Fig. 1).

The scope of the archives includes the entire South Asian continent, with both visual and print material from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but the primary focus remains on India. Its ongoing projects include oral history recordings and video recordings of women in the Indian independence movement, educationists, activists, artists, scientists, public figures in politics and intellectuals. SPARROW is a vibrant cultural venue. Through talks, public conversations with artists and activists, workshops, writers' camps, exhibitions, film screenings and cultural festivals, women's histories are made accessible to a broader public. It also occasionally uses unconventional formats, such as taking the collections to the streets of Mumbai through an exhibition of posters and photographs on public double-decker buses (Fig. 2).

The Oral History Recording Programme constitutes one of the anchors of SPARROW's activities. The present collection hosts approximately 600 oral history recordings based on interviews with women involved in the Indian National Freedom Movement, left-wing parties, feminist movements, social and environmental justice, civil rights, Dalit life, expression and rights, science studies, tribal life and struggles, communalism, violence and human rights, as well as literature, culture and the artistic spheres. Sound materials include songs of movements, folk, film and classical music, radio programmes and recorded theatre performances. In terms of visual materials, the collection focuses on posters, calendars and advertisements in the media pertaining to and made by women. SPARROW also puts oral history values into practice, including trust and respect for the subjects of research, allowing sufficient time for sharing and articulating deep insights and challenges in one's lifetime, and arranging meetings in a place where the person being interviewed feels at ease. From interviews with theatre artists in regional theatres (2001), to portraits of transgender experiences, to films on activists, writers and photojournalists from the early 20th century, the films offer insights into the lives of these women in delicate ways (Fig. 3).

Between 2012 and 2015, SPARROW published a four-volume anthology of 87 writers in 23 Indian languages, accompanied by detailed interviews. These publications differ from the anthologies produced by national or regional literary academies in the way they document not only those women writers who managed to achieve successes by way of awards and publicity, but also writers in languages largely ignored by the publishing industry, such as Maithili, Sindhi, Garo or Mizo. The interviews offer insights into the biographies, struggles and challenges encountered by the writers, and the price they sometimes pay for their critical and honest stances towards the societies they live in.

In times when the imperative of easy access comes along with the unquestioned equation of information and knowledge, SPARROW follows a strong policy of insisting that the materials be consulted in depth and upon adhering to standards of scholarly rigour. Requests for screening short clips, trailers or edited versions for television are turned down, not because of a refusal to make the films available to a larger audience, but because of an insistence that a deeper understanding of the issues addressed will necessarily take time and cannot be condensed into quick information bites. Given...
that some of the material is extremely sensitive, and addresses taboo topics in Indian society and politics, SPARROW demands that those who have dared to speak out and share their stories and struggles be listened to with patience and attention, and not be subject to abbreviation and further silencing.