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A new feminism is emerging in Asia

How Asian activists are fighting successfully for a more inclusive and effective feminist movement

As feminists from across the globe take stock of the state of women's rights and gender equality at the Beijing+25 conference, there are feelings of both pain and promise. The struggles of feminist movements since the adoption of the UN Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, which remains one of the strongest commitments to women's human rights, have brought considerable successes in securing women's political, social and economic rights.

There are more women in political offices, better legal protection and more countries include gender equality in their constitutions and development agendas. According to UN WOMEN, the regular five-year reviews have sustained a momentum. However, these hard-won gains are under serious threat from the emergent patterns of de-democratisation, neoliberalism and right-wing nationalist political leadership.

In that context, the feminist movements of the Global South and Global North do face a common set of challenges. But feminism in Asia offers a more critical approach, as it attempts to embrace both universalism of women's human rights and particular social, cultural and religious realities. This makes the struggle to realise gender equity more effective and inclusive.

Feminism in Asia, a feminism for all?

The process of globalisation and the onset of communication technology have narrowed the divide between the Global North and the Global South, facilitating speedy diffusion of emerging feminist agendas. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the #MeToo movement, which erupted in the Global North and was transmitted to and readily embraced by feminists in Asia, in connection with the issues of violence against women and sexual harassment in the workplace and online.

However, a significant digital gender divide persists in Asia. Women have

less access to the internet and digital devices than men because of established patriarchal social norms and economic constraints. In Bangladesh, women factory workers turn to hunger strikes and more traditional modes of mobilisation instead of hashtags to raise a collective voice against abuses.

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This puts Asian feminists in the challenging position of making their inclusive and intersectional feminism work for both the English-speaking urban elite with Twitter accounts and for the poor, rural, lower-caste agricultural worker without a phone. The 'Aurat March' (Women's March) in Pakistan is a good example of how a movement to reclaim public spaces brought together urban educated feminists, marginalised poor urban women and rural women agricultural workers on a common platform. Here, powerful visual art, street theatre and music played an important role in translating universal feminist concerns into the local context.

Inclusive alliances

With representation from feminists and political activists of all ages, classes and genders, the Girls at 'Dhabas' movement in Pakistan and India's 'Pinjra Tod' (Break the Cage) and 'I Will go Out' movements are additional examples of more inclusive alliances.

In these examples, women formed small informal initiatives and addressed very specific issues at first such as restrictive house rules for female students. They dared to go out alone or in groups at night and made smart use of social media, making their individual acts visible to wider audiences. They were also open and adapted to criticism about inclusiveness and pushed intersectionality by reflecting about class and caste. Very soon they picked up wider social justice issues such as domestic violence or climate change.

They have pushed the boundaries of political feminist activism, articulating the demand to reclaim public spaces in conjunction with the struggle against patriarchal structures, oppressive cultural practices and discriminatory legislation. These are all phenomena that curb women's rights and freedoms, resulting in glaring gender inequalities within the household and the workplace.

Feminists in Europe and the US often demand a greater presence of women in company's boardrooms, which is a very thick glass ceiling to break, even for well-educated, upper-class women. In the Asian context, this seems to be a less important concern. In the experience of women in Asia, having women in leadership positions – often from political dynasties, such as Indira Gandhi, Corazon Aquino, Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina and Megawati Sukarnoputri – does not necessarily lead to more equality for all, in politics or in work. More inclusive approaches to feminist demands seem more sustainable than relying on one woman, or one class of women, at the top.

While we cannot paint feminism in Asia with one brush, there are long-standing issues that remain common across the region. Traditional and patriarchal beliefs, safety concerns and the unequal division of care work restrain women's movements and make their work invisible. Securing economic and workers' rights as well as benefits for women working under informal arrangements brings different challenges.

A future of work that works for women

In Asia, as elsewhere, the future of work and the impact of the 4th Industrial Revolution are debated widely, and most governments have launched national policies to prepare for the unfolding challenges. But the lack of women's perspectives on the future of work policies in the region is very apparent.

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The issues have yet to catch the attention of the feminist movement and become part of the feminist agenda. Expertise, research and advocacy efforts vary across the region, where one country's present is another's future. This is partly due to the different pace at which the 4th Industrial Revolution is unfolding, and party the backdrop of the discourse itself. As discussions around the future of work are still dominated by institutions and businesses in the Global North, Asia is bringing more diverse perspectives and other priority areas to light.

Researchers at IT for Change, the Centre for Internet & Society in India and the Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan are carrying out commendable research and policy advocacy work in this context, and organisations such as Geek Girls in Myanmar aim to improve women's access to technology. More precarious and informal work might be a trend in the Global North, but it is already the reality for most people in

Asia, where platformisation and the gig economy are nothing new. Here, it is the present rather than the future that is of concern; in the absence of social protection it is linked to daily survival.

Solutions for all

Other aspects, such as the impact of automation and potential job losses for women in the garment sector in Bangladesh, still need more research. Care work and its links with the multiple burdens that women carry throughout their lives has gained attention in some countries, in Myanmar and Indonesia even the term 'care work' needs public recognition before wider debates can begin.

The diverse experiences in Asia call for intersectional research of the many complex developments and how they affect various parts of society differently. This should also be beneficial for debates in the Global North. Looking for solutions that work for all makes the demands and recommendations from our Asia-wide exchanges even stronger and more relevant. As neoliberal capitalism further perpetuates the marginalisation of vulnerable groups across all genders, the answer must be feminist solidarity and comprehensive structural changes that tackle systemic economic and social inequalities.



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