

Introduction: Women, their rights, and the obstacles they face in realizing them

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Throughout Asia, women are treated unequally in all facets of public and private life. They continue to be victim to various forms of abuse, including sexual violence. Their freedoms are curtailed to the extent of being non-existent in many places, with women having little or no say in their education, employment or choice of marriage partner. State institutions play their own part in violating women's basic rights and perpetuating the abuse they suffer.

This collection of seven essays—from Bangladesh, Burma, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—sheds some light onto the various obstacles facing women in realizing their rights, and the environments they must do this in. While making no claims to be a comprehensive study of women in the various countries, this issue of *Ethics in Action* (volume 5, number 6, December 2011) offers a window into the lives of a significant proportion of Asia's population. This window further illuminates many systemic issues that are common to the region's various countries, preventing the realization of women's rights.

Three of the essays for instance, from Manipur (India), Indonesia and Bangladesh discuss the plight of women who lost their family members through forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. These women are left to pick up the pieces of a life destroyed by the death of the main income earner. In both Manipur and Indonesia, no compensation is given by the state to the families or widows for the wrongful death of their men folk. In all three countries, these women are stigmatized and seen as families of 'criminals'. They must find ways to support their children and other family members, at times resorting to illegal means. There are few networks in place to support these women, financially, socially or legally. This is one place to begin in improving access to justice for women, and thereby protecting their rights.

The deeply patriarchal nature of Asian societies makes it generally difficult for women to speak out or make any complaints against the multitude of abuse suffered on a daily basis. Sexual violence is something faced by all Asian societies, albeit to varying degrees. The essays from Manipur, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan particularly focus on this issue. Baseer Naveed points out that all kinds of violence against Pakistani women is condoned by tribal courts and conservative politicians, making it impossible for women to seek any remedies or redress from state agencies. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka meanwhile, the police are often in collusion with the wealthy and influential perpetrators of rape and other violence, and thus take no action against them in favour of the victims.

This is an important point that needs to be underlined—when state and public officials themselves have a discriminatory attitude towards women, the institutions and laws meant to protect their rights become meaningless, as shown in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Shreema Ningombam also discusses how in Manipur's conflict-ridden society, women's economic, social and cultural rights are neglected by the overriding concerns of nationhood and political tussles.

The essays from Burma and Indonesia reflect on the capacity and struggle of women survivors of human rights abuse. Their personal experience as well as a strong commitment to human rights values and belief in democracy, has made them keen to play a major role in their countries' transformation. Making up a good part of the human rights movement in Burma, more than half of the country's political prisoners are women. Many of them are mothers, who wish to fight for a better future for their children; a democratic future. The abuse they face for fighting for human rights and democracy makes them even more determined to ensure that future generations do not face the same situation. The Indonesian essay spotlights three women, mothers and wives, fighting for the rights of their sons/families, and reveals that solidarity amongst women victims helps them become their own best advocates.

Also included in this volume is the Asian Human Rights Commission's statement on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which focuses on women's inability to access justice, due to both social and institutional factors.

While this collection of essays reveals the considerable abuse and discrimination faced by women, it also indicates the systemic problems that need to be addressed to better protect women's rights. Most importantly, the essays make clear that women's rights are not indivisible from the larger rule of law and justice system issues; in fact, many obstacles faced by women stem from weak rule of law institutions. At the same time, social change and awareness regarding women's rights is essential. Those interested in women's rights and justice should discover enough food for thought from this volume, and find their own starting points for improving the environment in which half of the region's population find themselves.