



Gains of Gender Equality: Framing Discourses On Gender Equality And Women's Rights Amidst Religious Resistance In Southeast Asia

*An Inter-Movement Dialogue among Academics and
CSOs from Southeast Asia*



Bangkok, Thailand, 10-11 August 2018

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Background

The premise of this regional dialogue is that Southeast Asian societies are strengthened by practices of gender equality at the economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres. It is founded on the belief that while the advocacy for women's rights is led by women, its achievement will also benefit men and liberate them from the systemic socialization of power, dominance, and violence. It is also founded on the belief that sexual rights or sexual autonomy are central forms of freedoms. They are freedoms not just for people of non-conforming sexualities (LGBTQI), but for all who desire sexual expression free from repressive socio-cultural taboos.

The lifelong struggle of many for gender equality, women's rights, and sexual autonomy are gender and sexual practices that shape human rights and peace policies and narratives in everyday life. In some analysis, gender practices in human rights and peace are not visible. In other cases, gender may be added on to human rights and peace advocacy.

This dialogue sought to strengthen an integrative approach to understanding human rights and peace as inherently shaped by gender and sexual practices. As a culminating activity of the four-year SHAPE-SEA program, the committees, namely Research, Publications, Education, and Academic Partnerships and Public Advocacy, came together to launch a Regional Dialogue entitled, Gains of Gender Equality:

Framing Discourses On Gender Equality and Women's Rights Amidst Religious Resistance in Southeast Asia

Objectives

The two-day dialogue intended to generate collective learning, collaborative leadership and co-creation of actions for strengthening human rights and peace in SEA through:

1. Exchanges on the gains in the area of gender equality in SEA across spheres of life – at the policy level, economic conditions, and/or socio-cultural practices despite the challenges of religious blocks;
2. Sharing of approaches of overcoming restrictive religious traditions that have led to strengthening women's exercise of power/empowerment particularly among women from the most marginalized sectors of societies in SEA;
3. Conversations about the different ways of challenging religious resistance to sexual freedoms and the silence surrounding sexuality and sexual politics in the Southeast Asian context, particularly among people of non-conforming sexualities;
4. Identifying what works, what needs to continue and what else needs to be done to ensure that notwithstanding religious extremism, gender and sexual practices are integral to understanding and shaping human rights and peace in SEA.

Day 1 | 10 August 2018

Welcome Remarks

Melizel Asuncion, SHAPE-SEA Secretariat Director



Melizel Asuncion, the Secretariat Director of SHAPE-SEA greeted and welcomed the participants to the Regional Dialogue. First she provided a short background of SHAPE SEA, and explained that it is a joint program of two regional networks – the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the Southeast Human Rights Studies Network (SEAHRN). Ms. Asuncion explained that the first phase of the program is coming to an end, and it is evident that the work that has been done needs to continue. However, it also needs to be further sharpened, and make a transformative and sustainable impact in the region.

The two-day conversation hopes to facilitate an exchange of individual and collective insights around and beyond the topic of religious resistance to gender equality, women’s rights, and sexual autonomy as a problematic area in human rights and peace. Furthermore, Ms. Asuncion explained that the SHAPE SEA secretariat has encountered many of the participants in their previous activities, and they hope to continue working together for the second phase.

Lastly, Melizel Asuncion reminded the participants that the conversation to be held for the next two days is not intended to be politically correct, nor about gender policing.

They wish to learn from each other, and understand where they converge and where they do not. She hopes that the two days will meaningfully contribute to the participant’s work in human rights, as well as contribute to the shaping of SHAPE SEA.

Who’s in the room: A Connecting Exercise

Josephine Perez, Luz Martinez, Facilitating Team



As an introduction, the participants were tasked to group by country, introduce themselves, and share how they are connected to each other professionally and personally.

Inter-Movement Dialogue via World Café

Josephine Perez, Luz Martinez, Facilitating Team

The facilitators, Josephine Perez and Luz Martinez, began the session by explaining the mechanics of the World Café. The overall calling question the participants focused on is, “*What are our gains on women’s rights, sexual rights, and gender equality amidst religious resistance in SEA?*”. The facilitators also presented the four conversation topics that build on each other. Each conversation was guided by a question, and the participants were given one hour to discuss.

Topic 1: When do I champion/not champion/sometimes champion gender equality and why?

Group 1

The group questioned the concept of gender equality and stated that it needs to be sharpened to be more inclusive of diverse intersections (sexual orientation, gender identity, expressions, race, ethnicity, culture). Additionally, LGBT rights are not part of the whole discourse in gender equality. As part of the academe and CSOs, the concepts must be redefined and reiterated in their work, and be mindful of the factors that intersect. There is also a need to champion their notion of gender equality for the voiceless

Group 2

The second group also questioned the concept of gender equality. To achieve equality, they must challenge the authorities, however they must negotiate with a level of flexibility so as not to offend and humiliate one another. They also emphasized that discussing gender issues within the family is much more difficult compared to talking about it at work, thus the need to bridge the gap between the public and the private



Group 3

The group also raised the concept of gender equality, and stated that it still assumes equality between “men and women”. They discussed the importance of education towards gender equality. Additionally, they reiterated that though it is easy to lobby for

equality in their respective governments, it is difficult to discuss the matter within their own family. The group brought out the issue of discussing and advocating for gender equality and women’s rights to the community and stateless people as gender rights are often not their priority, thus there is a need to localize concepts of gender and rights to better communicate and advocate in communities with traditional beliefs and values.



Group 4

The group explained that when championing for gender equality, one must be a champion “every waking moment”. The jokes uttered are indicators of how much a society has progressed, as it reveals what is acceptable and what is not. Male participants within the group expressed their concern, and shared that they are not confident enough to champion gender equality, and view themselves as shallow. Thus there is a need to change the concept of masculinity. Finally, the group shared that to be gender sensitive, and to be champions can be “painful” at times.

Group 5

The group explained that they champion gender equality most of the time, and assume that gender is a given, thus they asked themselves “when do we not champion gender equality?”. They shared that people often do not focus on the issue of gender unless misogyny takes place. They also stressed the importance of understanding other intersecting identities and to not only focus on gender.



Furthermore, they recognized the importance of understanding the nuances and differences of gender issues in each country in the region, as these issues are often silenced by the mainstream discourse. The group explained that they continue to champion gender equality because misogyny is “morally wrong”, hence the group stated that there is a need to work with the youth and influence people to become champions and advocates

Group 6

The sixth group added to the conversations by discussing the struggles of being champions of gender equality in the cultural and educational aspect. They also explained that pushing for certain policies towards gender equality is different from actually practicing it, thus the need to “walk the talk”.

Group 7

Similar to the third group, the final group reiterated the importance of localizing certain concepts. For instance, LGBTQI is a western concept and there is a need to localize it so people from the ground are able to understand. Additionally, the male participants in the group shared that when they do champion for gender equality, cisgender heterosexual men are seen as “gay” or “weak”. They explained that though there is nothing wrong with being gay, they do not want to be labeled as something they are not, they stated that there is a need to “get out of the box” and change such assumptions

Topic 2: What have we achieved so far in our work for women’s rights, sexual rights and/or gender equality?

Group 1

The first group talked about how the concept of gender has become more fluid and has changed over time. The traditional concept of gender as binary has continuously been evolving with society.

Group 2

The second group discussed the importance of how gender is framed. They stated that gender equality can be problematic in the eyes of the government and for religious fundamentalist thus the need to strategize. The group emphasized the importance of finding the balance between being “quiet” for their safety, and being “loud” so that their issues and concerns can be heard.

Group 3

The third group identified history and memory as critical elements to understanding where one comes from and what they do. According to the group, some of the achievements that has been accomplished includes feminist production of knowledge in challenging patriarchy, recognizing the importance of intergenerational movements, and the co-optation of movements.



Group 4

The fourth group shared their professional and personal achievements. The

professional achievements include the passage of certain laws that protect women (i.e. Violence Against Women, and Reproductive Health Law), as well as the recognition of LGBT groups in the region. The personal on the other hand is how the older feminists and advocates are able to pass down their learning's and passion to their students. The challenge, however are the gatekeepers who continue to hinder the movement towards equality

Group 5

The group expressed that their commonality is that the participants in the group come from "failing democracies". However, the gains include the convergence of the CSO and academe working towards gender equality, and women's empowerment, as well as working with the government to involve more women in politics. The group recommended the continuous research on issues of gender and development.



Group 6

The group first talked about the personal achievements, how some participants are able to negotiate and communicate with their family, partners, and children about gender issues. The public on the other hand, includes achievements such as the passage of laws that protect women, the ability to influence other movements to carry gender issues, and the ability of movements to become more inclusive. The group however also mentioned that gender equality still seems unimportant in ASEAN, and that sexual rights is still a contentious issue within the region.

Group 7

The final group discussed language issues, for instance "tea house" can mean an actual Tea House or a brothel in Thailand, while the term "sex work" is often frowned upon in the Philippines. On the other hand, the group also considers language as an achievement because the English language was able to unite Southeast Asian nations to discuss gender issues and push towards gender equality

Topic 3. What are our CHALLENGES in advancing women's rights, sexual rights and gender equality in our school, organization, community, country, and region? What were our STRATEGIES in overcoming these challenges?

Group 1

The first group identified internal and external challenges. Internal challenges include women who do productive work still experience feelings of guilt because they feel that they are "neglecting" their reproductive work. The group problematized the internal challenges and asked "how should they translate the advocacy into actions?". The external challenges on the other hand include the inability of society to identify gender issues, and influencing and engaging certain groups to understand and discuss human rights and gender equality.



Group 2

The second group discussed the issue of gendered identities. For instance, a woman who is drug dependent is reduced and simply identified as a drug addict". The

issue reveals society's inability to separate the problem from the person.



Group 3

The third group identified several challenges that hinder the advancement of women's rights. First is authoritarian leadership that has become a "backlash" in the women's movement, second is the "fake acceptance" of sexual rights, gender equality, and expression, and third is the rise of violent extremism or the one nation, one identity notion. The group recommended that social movements must engage and involve the younger generation as well as the men towards gender equality. They also stated that the academe must be able to go back to their roots of analysis, documentation, and note taking so that they are able to combat fake news and abuse of data. Other suggestions include, CSOs to work with communities at the grassroots level, advocates to master the use of social media to popularize human rights and gender equality, and the creation of a network of support for advocates.

Group 4

The fourth group talked about the power of social media. It has changed the paradigm of development work, thus the need for activists to respond to issues faster. However, many people do not post or comment online against fundamentalists or conservatives because of the backlash they may receive. In some countries on the other hand, people are jailed or fined for speaking out on social media. Furthermore,

governments use social issues and continue to make false promises in order to be elected. The group recommended that the academe and CSO need to create a better system to monitor and pressure the government.

Group 5

The fifth group expressed their concern over the lack of support governments are providing for LGBT groups, they also stated that the "lack of involvement of the youth is disheartening, as initiatives from the government to include the youth is rare. Similar to the other groups, they also identified the rise of fundamentalist groups as a challenge, as well as the lack of acceptance to talk about sexual reproductive health rights. According to the group, teachers still lack the competency to discuss the matter to their students. The group suggested changing the narratives in the education system, as well as the creation of effective mechanisms to protect the LGBT community



Group 6

The challenge group six discussed is how society views the younger generation. Though they are often seen as "self-centered", members of the group challenged the notion as "care of the self". They stated that it is important to tap into the youth, as many advocates are becoming more tired thus the need to take care of themselves as well. Additionally, the younger generation may provide other ways of seeing. The group emphasized the

importance of continuously interrogating issues and challenging the dominant discourses in order to understand the different ways of understanding the world. In some cases, it is best to keep the issue “open ended”.

Group 7

Tradition and customary practices are seen as obstructions and challenges to the seventh group. For instance, even if the education system is slowly incorporating sex education in schools, many parents do not want their children being taught such topics. Another challenge many Southeast Asian countries face is the military control most especially in the ethnic regions. Women suffer from rape and sexual violence under the hands of the military. The group suggested conducting peace dialogues with CSOs, human rights organizations, government agencies, police, and community leaders.



Reflections

Before proceeding with the fourth question, participants shared some of their reflections during the conversations. First, language is an important tool but it needs to be simplified to be able to communicate and connect with communities at the grassroots level. Second, though women’s rights has been gaining a positive feedback with regards to gender equality, when LGBT rights are included and discussed, the movement receives a backlash. Third, the participants stated the some feminists are exclusionary and judgmental, most

especially when it comes to the topic of the youth. The participants warned other feminists to be cautious of exclusionary attitudes, as it is a new form of fundamentalism, thus the need to become more reflexive.



Topic 4. What is the new thinking that can inform, build, inspire our work in gender, peace and human rights?

Group 1

- To do Comparative Studies across cultures and to understand how to solve problems in specific contexts
- To involve more men in the discussion of human rights, and women’s rights
- To inspire women to fight for their rights
- To gain a better understanding of the intersections between gender/sexual rights and economic rights
- To use social media as a platform to advocate and provide accurate information about human rights

Group 2

- To mentor and involve the youth as well as non-activists in the social movements
- To use simple language to popularize human rights
- To address and approach issues by understanding the root cause. Advocates needs to continuously ask the government WHY questions, until they are no longer able to answer

Group 3

- To create an online network of resource persons who are experts on the topics

of human rights, women's rights, LGBT rights, and other diverse groups of people so that organizations conducting conferences, dialogues, and other events are able to tap into the advocates rather than always tapping male speakers



Group 4

- To be cautious of adultism (i.e. when adults assume they are better than children, or when feminists assume they know better than others)
- To reinvent and rethink feminism, as it has become exclusionary. To reinvent the movement to one that is more inclusive
- To use the power of pop culture to popularize feminism, human rights, and gender equality among the youth

Group 5

- To use simple language or use creative mediums (dance, theater, song, art) to popularize Human Rights
- To recognize and allow people to express their own identity to create a more accepting society
- CSOs to use academic approach, while academics to understand reality on the ground

Group 6

- For new ideas to form, one must put themselves in the shoes of the other
- To embrace the resistance, as resistance is a form of recognition. No recognition, means no impact

- To create friendly alliances with those who resist, rather than engaging with them through hostility

Group 7

- To do research and identify problems the grassroots community experience before providing solutions
- To make use of Social Media to popularize and transform attitudes towards human rights, peace, and gender equality
- To campaign against sexual violence and discrimination in Universities to reveal the hidden issues
- To create safe spaces and platforms for the youth to speak out (i.e. workshops, trainings, etc) and allow them to use their own creative means to push for human rights, gender equality, and peace
- To have a dialogue with politicians and community leaders to address and create solutions together

Day 2 | 11 August 2018

Open Space

Josephine Perez, Luz Martinez,
Facilitating Team

The second day of the conference used the method, Open Space. The theme/calling question of the Open Space is, "*How do we resist religious resistance?*". The participants were able to present topics, questions, and new ideas revolving around the theme.

Open Space Topics and Discussions

Group 1

Topic(s):

- *How to engage constructively with opponents*
- *How to respond to the hijacking of gender/feminism among extremist/terrorist groups? "Victims vs. agency"*

Key Discussion Points

- There is a need to constructively engage with those who do not agree with the sentiments of CSOs and the academe, and to not dehumanize them.
- Advocates must respond to the issue rather than attacking the person
- CSOs and the academe must make an effort to understand those who label themselves as fundamentalists and terrorists, especially their strengths, weaknesses, values within their religion/community, values of their actions
- How should people engage with fundamentalists and change their mindset?
- Limited research on women's voices and narratives in extremist groups
- Religious resistance occurs as a response to/against poverty, oppression, and lack of access to knowledge
- Discussion on reproductive health is an entry point towards engaging with the religious



Action Points

- Do not call those who oppose human rights, peace, and gender equality as “opponents”, as it invokes hurt and negative feelings
- To have a dialogue with the authorities, as well as those on the ground
- To bring the debate to a more centrist position
- To address the issue, not the person

Group 2

Topic: Why sexuality can't be discussed along with religion/faith?

Key Discussion Points

- Sexuality seen in a negative light (i.e. sexuality as evil, sexuality related to sin of the flesh)
- Sexuality can usually be discussed within religious communities when the audience is homogenous (i.e. all women audience, or all men participants)
- Religious groups have varying perspectives towards certain issues on sexuality and gender
- The different interpretations from diverse religious leaders and scholars can help bring forward new ideas and actions towards sexuality and gender issues



Action Points

- Strengthen knowledge and raise awareness about gender, sexuality, body authority, power, self, identity, and interfaith through trainings
- Local/National/Regional Inter-Dialogue between advocates of gender equality and sexual rights with religious leaders/scholars
- Movie screening related to sexuality and religion to encourage discussion
- Develop a database of resource persons who are advocates, progressive religious leaders, and social influencers
- SEAHRN and SHAPE SEA, organizations promoting human rights,

educational institutions, youth groups, and religious communities to take the lead



Group 3

Topic: *Social Media's Weaponisation*

Key Discussion Points

**Discussion points for group 3 were further clarified after the group discussions*

- There is inequality when it comes to access to data and information thus the need to create hotspot areas.
- Language is one of the barriers online because most the information posted online are often written in English
- Netizens must take the lead in taking action because they are the ones who use social media, and have the power to make human rights and gender issues go “viral” thus giving more attention towards the advocacy
- There is a need to reply to comments in a calm manner

Action Points

- To train advocates, academe, and all netizens in digital literacy
- To empower people in the social media community rather than policing online posts

Group 4

Topic: *Identity and Self Care*

Key Discussion Points

- Religious identity is being used against women within religion itself, and by

politicians and authoritarians working with patriarchal religious leaders

- Authoritarians dictate what is taught and how it is practiced and it is hypocritical especially to women and other marginalized groups
- Resistance should be allowing people and women especially to be confident on asserting their identities
- Self-care is related to first knowing yourself (identity) and building your community.

Group 5

Topic: *Impunity and women hating*



Key Discussion Points

- Women hating is often subtle and happens on an everyday basis
- To not take action against sexual harassment, sexual violence, and to not care about women, and children are considered “women hating”.
- Women’s movement takes a step backward because of misogyny
- Political authoritarianism, fascism, and failing democracies must be exposed

Action Points/Questions

- How do we package the discourses?
- How do we expose authoritarianism, religious morality, women hating, and impunity?
- To create cross movement coalitions that are interdisciplinary

Group 6

Topic: *How to enhance intellectual knowledge in advocacy towards gender-based rights*



Key Discussion Points

- Academics role is to teach and to do research. There is a need to teach theories and support movements in the academe, as well as to do research in advocacy (i.e. citizenship, reproductive health, etc)
- To build new definitions for new terms and concepts
- It is important to use simple language in current affairs rather than writing long articles to respond to issues
- To connect with regional academic networks, and for SHAPE SEA to conduct more regional dialogue's and conferences
- Discuss gender issues that are still hidden, such as issues of transgenders (clothes, names, pronouns)

Action Points

- CSOS and Media to work together
- Academe to use simple language in order to influence others
- Academe to be resource persons for CSO dialogues, conferences, and other events, and vice versa
- Academe to be part of CSO

Group 7

Topic: *Amidst religious resistance, have social movements become obsolete?*

Key Discussion Points

- Obsolete is a double edged sword – social movements may have achieved their goals or social movements are not willing to recognize the need to change their strategies or ways of thinking
- Religious fundamentalists and authorities have appropriated the human rights language
- Social movements are donor driven, because there is a need to survive and compete with other movements, however it affects the goals and agenda
- The political and policy environment limits the space to negotiate for certain policies. The lawmakers “call the shots”, and define what is needed, for whom, and why?
- Unity is overrated, and is often used under authoritarian contexts for authoritarian purposes.

Action Points

- To decenter from the “I”, and move to the “WE” model
- Paradigm shift to “WE-nities” and “WE-identities”
- There is a need to accept the multiple realities and the diversity within the region



Gallery Walk

After the Open Space conversations, the topics and key discussion and actions points were posted around the room where

participants are able to read the summary of the group's discussions. They were also tasked to post their general comments, as well as their wish to collaborate in research, training, and advocacy for each of the topics.

Plenary Circle - Round Robin

Participants were tasked to share one word or a statement to describe how they feel about the past two days

First, many of the participants felt a sense of urgency, frustration, and felt challenged to take action when they go back to their respective areas. Many stated the need to be creative, innovative, and bold in order to analyse and identify what kind of strategy is effective, and what is no longer effective.



Second, participants felt hopeful and optimistic to work together. Others expressed that after the two-day dialogue, many felt loved, respected, and nourished. Furthermore, the dialogue gave them the chance to collaborate and network with the various organizations present. One participant in particular, shared that one of the highest points during the event is knowing that there are varying generations of feminists within the room.

Third, participants appreciated the unique process of how the two days was handled. Some expressed that though the process was exhausting because of the active listening and continuous conversations they

had to do, they were still able to gain great insights from one another. According to the participants, with the guidance of the facilitators, they were able to reflect, and analyse and question their own assumptions. They also felt safe as they are able to freely share their ideas without fear from negative comments and political backlash. One participant in particular stated that she feels "empowered", because they were considered as the resource person. Participants were also impressed with how the facilitators were able to guide the discussions, and apologize for mistakes or inconvenience they may have caused.

Fourth, though the region shares commonalities and differences, the participants stated that there is "no one size that fits all". However, despite the differences, the region continues to converge by discussing human rights, gender, and peace issues and taking action.



Fifth, some of the participants reiterated some of the takeaways and insights they have gained such as the importance of creating friendly alliances with those who resist rather than responding with hostility, engaging with the youth, men and other diverse groups, and the need to start within the family.

Other comments include the importance of being silent after two full days of talking and listening, the need to keep resisting, and the need to rest and take care of oneself as advocates.

Photos

