

Liberalism – A Defence of women's rights

Over the past decade, we have made great progress in Asian and Pacific countries. We have seen substantial improvements in enrolment in all levels of education, especially for girls, more women obtaining advanced degrees, an increase in women's labour force participation and a reduction in poverty.

Yet despite the improvements in the overall figures, we know that these advancements are still not enough. As leaders, decision makers, and as women, we continue to face an uphill battle.

- The glass ceiling in public administration still remains, posing sizable obstacles to decision making (in Cambodia public administration is made up of 34% women, but only 18% at the decision making level; and in Indonesia the divide is greater with 47% of public administration being women, and 8% at decision making levels).
- We are still striving towards gender equality in education and in the labour market (it is estimated that the Asia Pacific region loses up to US\$47 billion per year because of women's limited access to employment opportunities, and an additional US\$16 to US\$30 billion due to gender gaps in education).
- This is not to mention on going, pervasive violence against women, and barriers to exercising freedom of expression. (Approximately 1 out of 3 women in the world will experience gendered violence. 30% of women in Vietnam have experience physical violence from intimate partners, and more than 40% of women have experienced this type of violence in Bangladesh, Samoa and Timor Leste and over 60% in Solomon islands and Vanuatu.) These figures are shockingly high.

To burden us further, we are now at a critical point in time where the breakdown of liberalism is resulting in overt oppression, discrimination and violence under the guise of democratic systems.

Illiberal leaders have pushed back the progress of civil, political and property rights – rights women struggle to achieve even what we would consider the most open of societies. On a world stage we have recently heard leaders condone sexual harassment, bully women for their looks, and silence women's cries of sexual harassment.

In Cambodia, we have fought against an illiberal system for decades. Our elections were plagued by threats, oppression and corruption, and basic liberties of speech went unprotected. Women activists are continually and brutally arrested for peaceful protests on our streets, their freedom of speech interrogated by police, and their civil liberties removed by authorities. Land owners fight for the right to maintain their own property, and for women, the loss of land is the loss of their livelihoods – the loss of their ability to support their families.

We are continually reminded that women's rights are human rights. That equal to all those who live under liberal systems we should be free from violence and even the threat of violence. Free to make decisions about our bodies and our lives – our partners and how we raise our kids. We should have access to options, to learn,

work, or to stay at home and raise a family if we so choose. But it boils down to that, women should have a choice.

And when those civil, political and property rights are being stripped on a country level, due to shifting politics, all those basic rights are put under threat. And we know how difficult a journey it is.

Therefore, as liberals and democrats, I urge you to be defenders of these rights and liberties that illiberalism threatens to take away. We cannot assume that democracy means liberalism. Instead we must be vocal, we must denounce the slander, the oppression, discrimination and violence. In this way, those who hide behind the veil of democracy can be revealed as inadequate, dangerous. Silence legitimises illiberalism, however, by gathering, vocalising and organising around women's rights, we can proceed and progress towards a more equal, a more liberal future. This here is our first step, and I encourage you – as defenders of women's and human rights - to join me, on what will be a challenging but fruitful journey to come.