Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia: "Gender Relations in Laos since the New Economic Mechanism and "Critical Relativism: An Intersectional Approach to Gender Equality"

CSEAS's Gender Equality Promotion Committee organized its Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia seminar on January 12, 2023. The presentations by Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath from the National University of Laos and Professor Sharon A. Bong of Monash University Malaysia, as well as insights from the commentators, Professors Chika Obiya and Yoko Hayami of CSEAS, stimulated a lively discussion around state rhetoric of equality; the changing status of women in socialist countries amid market reforms and globalization; the critical importance of land rights and gendered power dynamics within the family; intersectionality; critical relativism; faith-based approaches to advancing women's and human rights; and the limits of female political leaders.

Kisho Tsuchiya, assistant professor at CSEAS and a member of the gender equality promotion committee, began the seminar by noting that while Japan has a long, militant, and scholarly tradition of feminism and gender studies, various statistics, indicators, and everyday experiences demonstrate that the country is seriously lagging when it comes to gender equality and gender mainstreaming.

Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath is the Director of the Gender Studies Center and the Deputy Head of the History and Archaeology Department in the Faculty of Social Sciences, National University of Laos. She is a gender specialist and holds a doctoral degree from Humboldt University Berlin. With over 20 years of experience as a lecturer, researcher, trainer, and consultant in collaboration with national and international development agencies, she has a wide breadth of experience in the field of women rights and gender studies. She is well experienced in conducting fieldwork in rural communities, particularly among ethnic women in Laos. She uses qualitative methods and an interdisciplinary approach to conduct anthropology,

ethnolinguistic, history, human rights, and social impact assessment related research. The following is a brief version of Dr. Champathong Phochanthilath's presentation "Gender Relations in Laos Since the New Economic Mechanism" as well as related comments and questions from the commentators and audience.

What is Gender in Laos?

Whenever we discuss Laos, it is important to remember that in Lao, we do not have a term that directly translates as "gender." Instead, we use the term "gender roles" to refer to gender, so that today, people understand gender as gender roles, which has caused misunderstanding around the concept of gender. Most of the research also does not go beyond a focus on women's and men's roles. As we know, however, when you consider gender, you must look at the power relations in society.

Although Laos is small country of 7 million people, we have more than 160 ethnic groups (50 are officially recognized). Laos a mountainous, landlocked country, but it has become more land-linked with the opening of a railway to China, bridges to Thailand, and planned railways connecting it to other countries in Southeast Asia. Each ethnic group has their own tradition, culture, and language. Some have written language, and some do not. Traditional beliefs still play important roles for the Lao people. This is more pronounced in rural areas, but in urban areas as well, traditions still control the lives of men and women in the society. For example, when a Hmong woman is born, she belongs to her father, and after marriage (she must get married), she moves to her husband's house and stays with the parents of her husband. When her husband dies, she belongs to her son. She also changes her belief in her father's ancestors to her husband's when she gets married.

The New Economic Mechanism and the New Imagination Era in Laos

The political economic transformations of different periods have affected both men and women. Laos is currently a socialist country and therefore the construction of gender has been

influenced by Marxist and Leninist ideology, which says that women should be strong and work as members of the working class.

Laos reformed its economy in 1986 under the New Economic Mechanism, or NEM, as part of *Chintanakan Mai*, or the "New Imagination" era. The comprehensive policy of *Chintanakan Mai* opened Laos to all countries in the global economy, especially in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Chintanakan Mai* is a new way of thinking that aims to depart from the old way of thinking. In the old way, or *Chintanakan Gao*, we had a collective economy–everyone had to pass the same road and they received the same amount of profit. Many collective associations were not successful, because Lao people thought that although they worked so hard, they could not gain much, because the amount had to be distributed equally. But that was the idea, the concept of socialism, that everybody gets the same. The Party realized that the transition period to socialism may take longer than it expected and sought a new idea to help push the country forward. Therefore, in the 4th Party Congress of 1986 in Vientiane, the president of Laos introduced *Chintanakan Mai* and since then Laos has opened to the world.

If you ask Lao people, what are we now, are we capitalist or socialist, the answer might be, in terms of the economy, we must apply a market economy. In the beginning, the Party decided to achieve socialism for Laos without passing through any market economy, but it was not possible. The New Economic Mechanism reforms the central planned economy to a market economy. Today, the government considers that we are still moving along the way toward socialism, which is the final goal. But NEM has not only changed the economy, it also has impacted society and gender relations.

From Patriotic Daughters to "Loose" Women

Lao newspapers from the central economy period published numerous columns praising women as "Daughters of the Party." We can see from the articles and their titles that

everything belongs to the state. This type of propaganda raised the society to follow the political ideology. Female workers, especially the laborers in the garment factories, played a very important role and the newspapers lauded them as good workers. Every issue of the newspaper would collect stories about women workers to show how they were very strong to work for the state.

But after NEM, the perception of women changed from female laborers as a good workers—as model women building the nation—to individual survivors with overactive or unusual sexual behavior. This was especially the case for women working in the garment factories, where working conditions are quite bad. When it came to the market economy, female workers were devalued. In terms of sexuality, female garment workers were stigmatized as sex workers.

Another consequence of NEM was that the number of female laborers increased in the service sector when Laos opened as a tourist destination. Many Lao women began working in restaurants, hotels, and so on. In terms of income, some of course could earn more than before, but in the Lao tradition, women are still expected to stay at home and work in the household. Human trafficking has also increased as Laos opened to foreign investors. We see cases of Chinese investors who are already married in their home country, but who keep a Lao wife when they come to Laos for a few years. Many marry, but not with the official documents.

The Colonial Legacy of Women's Property Rights in Laos and the Impact of Privatization

Most historians begin Laos' history in the 14th century, with the unification of the Lane Xang Kingdom. Laos was under Siam from 1778 until 1893 and after that, it was colonized by France. In that short period of time America interfered. Laos was liberated and gained independence in 1975. The political shifts significantly affected Lao women. For example, when French colonial authorities conducted surveys to collect taxes, they demanded that Lao people have a family name. Among matrilocal groups, Lao women inherited land from their parents. But, when they were required to take a family name, it became her husband's name, and the land was

registered in his name. This reduced women's rights to property, especially the right of the land. This has had far-reaching impacts which continue today.

For example, when Lao women quit their job as a government officer because the salary is very low (within a couple, it is always the woman who leaves her job), they may open a small shop at home so that they can take care of their children and earn some money. In Laos, half of small enterprises are run by women. But limited access to credit and financial facilities is a challenge. To get a loan to do business requires many documents, including a land title/ land certificate. This causes a big problem for women, because although they have only a small shop at home, they do not have a business certificate. They do not want to apply for the land certificate get a bank loan, because for a Lao woman, it is very dangerous—of course the husband will not allow her to do that.

Privatization in Laos is another huge challenge. Everything is owned by the state. Since NEM, an individual can own land, but the land registration process is conducted solely by men. The head of the family in the family household registration book is always the man, so when the authorities arrive in a village to register land, it is always the men who join the process and only the husband's name is written on the land certificate. In this way, women lose their right to the land, even if that piece of land is inherited from her parents. This problem continues today.

The government has begun a project to promote gender equality in land rights, allowing couples to write two names on the land title. Therefore, the number of women who own land has increased, but it is still difficult. Among the couple, a woman does not dare to ask her husband to put her name on the title, because this causes a conflict when the husband thinks that she does not trust him. So, women keep quiet. They do this, and when it comes to divorce, women have no rights to the property.

Limits of the Political Sphere

The NEM has had some positive impact. Especially in the beginning, the government promoted education for all, particularly for girls. With a higher education, girls and young women have opportunities to continue their job and study abroad. In this way, many Lao women have upgraded their status from the grassroots to the middle class.

But of course, this is not always reflected in the political sphere. Political opportunities are reserved for those women who already have family or parents who played a very important role in society before independence. When it comes to high-ranking positions in the leadership, the field is not open. The number of women Politburo members is extremely small, and Laos has never had a female president or prime minister. Laos has had a few female ministers, including the Minister of Education and the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare. Although there are some women in today's Cabinet, not many of them play an important role. Laos had one female president of the National Assembly, but she is now retired. Overall, only 10 percent of high-ranking positions are held by women.

The Phonsena family in Laos provides an illustrative example. Among the family members, three siblings (two sisters and one brother) are in one government cabinet as ministers. In Laos, and it may be similar to other countries, if you have connections, if your family is strong in politics, you can maintain a higher position. But this is not the case for ordinary people. Of course, some ordinary people may reach high positions, but very few lead the country.

Comments and Questions

Professor **Yoko Hayami** provided comments based on her research experience with ethnic communities in Thailand. The following is a brief version of her comments.

We do not have much information about gender in Laos. To understand Laos, we tend to look at the two Asian socialist countries, Vietnam and China, which also have very strong economic and political influence on Laos presently, and Thailand, which has strong historical and cultural

connections to Laos. It was said that in both Vietnam and China, women's status rose during the socialist period and then as the market economy came in and liberation took place, women's status regressed to a certain extent. This was a stronger tendency in Vietnam in terms of discrimination against women and lower wages. The similarity is that in both countries, there is a stronger double burden because both countries expect women to be in the labor force, but their household roles—of taking care of children, the elderly, and so on—are enhanced because the state services have not continued, and many things are privatized. These are the kinds of comparisons that we hear about among the socialist countries. Thailand, like Laos, is a bilateral kinship-organized country with matrilocal residence so that women's role in the household is large—and expected to be large. This means that women have status in the household, but they also have responsibility, so it falls very heavily on women to go out and work. As the period of the socialist planned economy was very short for Laos, how do you locate Laos in these configurations in terms of differences and similarities?

Professor Chika Obiya provided commentary from the viewpoint of gender and socialism based on her own research field of Uzbekistan, an ex-Soviet federation Muslim country, and introduced some experiences of Soviet, post-Soviet, and Central Asian studies. She noted that it may be interesting to compare Laos to cases of former Soviet states and Soviet styled socialist states in Eastern Europe in the framework of post-socialist states, especially post-socialist anthropology, which is very active in Japan, and/or more general transitional studies in politics or economics, which have been very active trends after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Regarding gender issues, there remains keen interest in this research framework. The following is a brief version of her comments.

Women's Liberation and Gender Equality from the Soviet Perspective

The Soviet regime and the Communist Party pursued its own women's liberation with the goal of achieving equality between men and women. This promoted women's participation in economic and social activities, making women workers, and socialized housekeeping and childcare. Introduced in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, very roughly speaking, these goals were

more or less achieved in the 20th century, as we see an equality of men and women in terms of labor, labor opportunity, and wages in Soviet official statistical figures.

However, gender studies have pointed to the wage gap between blue collar (mostly men) and white collar (mostly women) workers, with the standard wages for blue collar workers being higher than for white collar workers in the Soviet Union. In other words, the wage gap was reflected as a wage gap between men and women, because more men were blue collar workers due to the physical work. Studies also highlight that men were not approached to support working women, and as a result, Soviet women were always exhausted from full time labor, housekeeping, and childcare, or the triple burden, which they very often coped with only by themselves. At the same time, no attention was paid to LGBTQ issues in terms of equality of rights. During the Stalin period and afterwards, gay (but not lesbian) relationships were a crime. I suppose the Soviet Union never knew the term gender, which includes sexual minorities.

After the Soviet disunion in 1991, ideological socialist equality between men and women was lost and gender studies find that women became victims of the transitional change and the market economy. Other studies focus on women, especially private entrepreneurs, who survived the transitional period by making subjective choices.

Global Standards versus Local Realities

To take an example of my field of Uzbekistan, it seems that some global standards like SDG goals sometimes conflict with post-socialist revival or reinterpretation of national local traditions, national values, traditional beliefs, and religion. We see that especially when the regime is authoritarian, like in Uzbekistan, somehow these global criteria are very quickly met in the official figures by a command from above. For example, last year Uzbekistan adopted the decision to achieve gender equality by 2030 and this year it reached its target that 30 percent of parliamentary candidates from each political party should be women. But of course, these targets do not solve all the problems regarding gender equality in the society. Anthropological studies have found that informal polygamy is widespread and gay relationships are still a crime

in Uzbekistan. Although Uzbekistan uses the term gender, gender in Uzbekistan still means only the relationship between men and women. We must pay attention carefully to the reality of people's daily lives as well as the history of a country's modernization and its cultural background.

In Laos, was there any Party-led socialist campaign or movement for the liberation of women? If so, what was it like and has it impacted today's gender situation? What do you think are the factors interfering with the promotion of gender equality today in Laos?

Responses

During the national liberation struggle, the Lao Party asserted that if the nation was liberated, then the women would be liberated. But after independence, women have remained lower than men. The explanation is that women were not only exploited or controlled by colonization, but also by the patriarchy, or the patriarchal system. As the Party ostensibly does not operate as a patriarchal system, they explain that due to "family matters"—because women must be responsible for the family—women cannot advance at the same level of the men. After independence in 1975, there was no clear policy on equality for women and men, because they were treated the same as workers. But since NEM, the promotion of women has been associated with the development issue. Today the Lao Women's Labor Union has the campaign to achieve the three values of "good citizen," "good development" and "good family." As Laos opened to the international community, it also signed CEDAW and many international conventions, which has applied outside pressure on the government to commit to promote gender equality in Laos.

During the war, women played very important roles—they joined the movement secretly, transporting weapons, food, and everything to the soldiers. They supported the movement. The Party recognizes this at every Party Congress. In a speech in Congress, the former president Kaisone Phomvihanh argued that women are very important and that without women, Laos would not be liberated and independent. In a party congress, he complained that the Party

Congress has very few female representatives. Why do we still today (in this congress) have few women?

Question

How many of the ten percent of high-ranking female officials push for women's rights? In the Philippines, even though statistically it looks good on paper, many female politicians do not push for women's or LGBT rights. How many of the women, especially those in the Politburo, make visible statements? Do they actively push for gender rights?

Response

There was only one female member of the Politburo to do so. Today there are two female members of the Politburo. There are more female National Assembly representatives, but the number of top leaders is very small.

The second presentation was given by **Dr. Sharon A. Bong**, a Professor of Gender Studies at Monash University Malaysia. She has authored *Becoming queer and religious in Malaysia and Singapore* (2020). She is the former coordinator and consultant of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia, an academic forum of feminist Catholic women theologians in Asia. Below is a brief version of her presentation titled "Critical Relativism: An Intersectional Approach to Gender Equality." Dr. Bong began by noting that her presentation is based on concepts she formulated during her days as a PhD student that continue to have relevance in later research projects. She shared to the students in the audience that no matter how senior one becomes in a field, your PhD experience never leaves you.

Brief History of Feminist Thinking and the Importance of Intersectionality

There have been three waves of feminisms that include various schools of feminist thought. In the first wave, women in the suffrage movement both in Europe and the US fought for the right to vote. This was important in terms of gender *equality*, or the sameness principle, although it

relied on the man standard, i.e. if men have the right to vote, then women should also have the right to vote. This was the value of gender *equality*. Gender *equity*, on the other hand, has driven a second wave of feminism. This recognizes how women in particular are disproportionately affected by various phenomena, whether it is poverty, ethnic wars, globalization, or the pandemic that all of us are living through today. It also recognizes inequalities among women.

Feminists critique other feminists when they perceive a gap and want to present a different dimension to cultivate a broader range of strategies to overcome various impediments and setbacks. Therefore, we see, for example, existential feminists challenging the notion that women are born inferior, radical feminists examining women's reproductive health and rights, and ecological feminists looking at how feminists care for the environment.

Postcolonial feminism emphasizes the importance of class, highlighting that women are discriminated not just on the grounds of their gender, but also based on their class. In this sense, intersectionality has always been a part of the feminist thinking and feminist practice. A feminist like Kimberlé Crenshaw from the United States discusses intersectionality in terms of how a woman of color is oppressed not only on account of her sex, but also her color (ethnicity) and by extension, her class. The vectors of oppression are therefore intersecting and require an intersectional approach. The history of feminism leaves us with a very rich tradition of how to examine different power structures and their multiple axes of power, which may leave a single individual discriminated against in multiple ways. We see that even in the 1980s, some were already discussing post-feminism, or the idea that we do not need feminism anymore, because, they argue, "all gender battles have been won." But this is not true.

Critical Relativism: A New Approach

Today I introduce the theoretical concept of critical relativism, which is inspired by the notion of intersectionality. I first started to think about critical relativism when witnessing women's rights activists using not just a human rights approach, but also a faith-based approach to

advance women's human rights. I have been fascinated by how some are able to reconcile what many feel is not reconcilable. I found this not only among women engaged in advancing women's human rights, but also from LGBT-identifying persons from Malaysia and Singapore who follow religious traditions of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism.

In dealing with difficult issues, we often come across an impasse, or a deadlock, when people have contrasting viewpoints and cannot agree on one approach. This applies to gender issues of today as well, for example sexual harassment and discrimination, better treatment of sons (arising from son preference in many Asian families), polygamy, or female genital mutilation. In one of her earlier her work on bioethics in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights, Etsuko Matsuoka, formerly of Nara Women's University, identifies four different strategies of dealing with an impasse. These range from moral imperialism to universalism, cultural relativism, and finally moral relativism (see diagram).

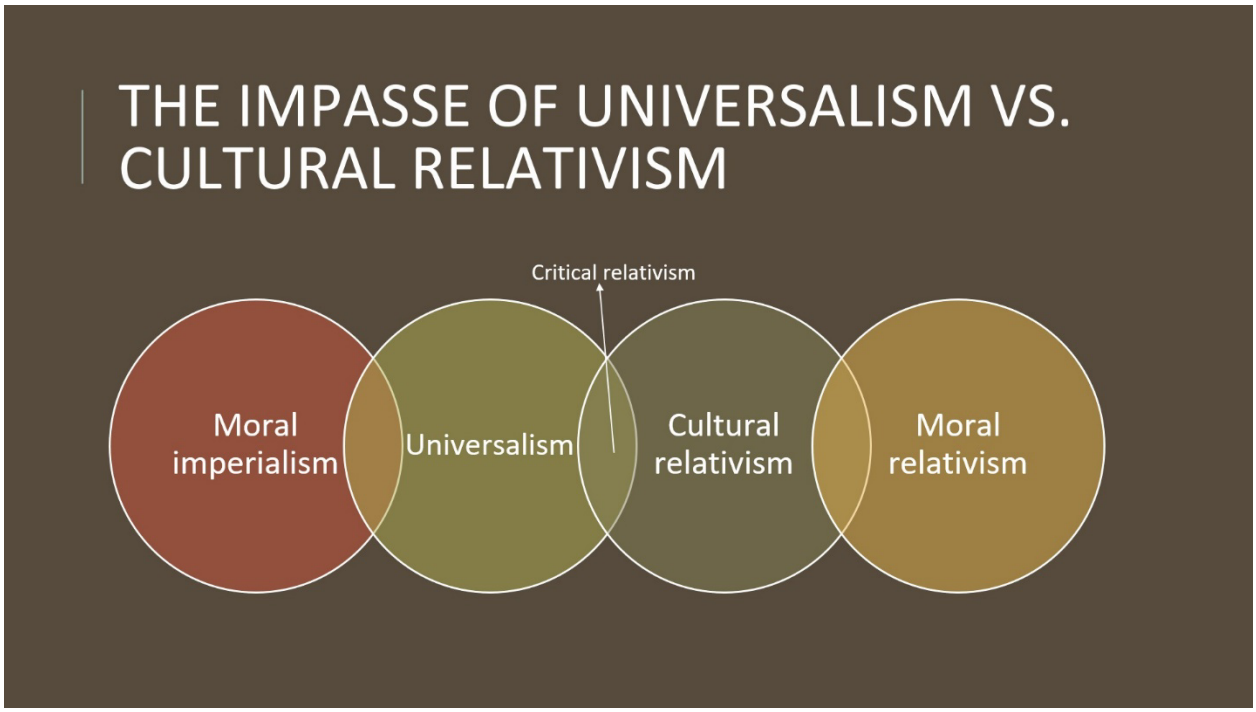

Figure 1 Critical relativism that integrates the universal and particular

A universalist, for example, is a believer in human rights. While they may respect local cultures and traditions, if there is a conflict of values, value systems, or ideologies, they will usually

privilege human rights. A cultural relativist, on the other hand, although aware of human rights, privileges the perceived good of the collective, the family, or the community and their adherence to cultural and religious practices.

Moral imperialists feel very, very strongly that there should be no exceptions and therefore they are fairly intolerant of cultural or local customs and practices that may clash with their position. An example of this is feminists from the Western world who look at a woman who is covered with a hijab and only see a woman who is oppressed, not a woman who may be voluntarily or willingly wearing the hijab. Morally imperialistic viewpoints have caused a backlash in which several Asian leaders assert that human rights are simply a Western value.

Moral relativism is the opposite of moral imperialism. Where moral imperialists in all circumstances value a universal such as human rights over and above a particular local culture or tradition, a moral relativist would do the opposite, would disregard human rights as running counter to a religious concept, for example. An example of this would perhaps be female genital mutilation: even when a tradition is obviously harmful, a moral relativist would still practice and defend it.

Each of these approaches alone is not adequate to deal with complex situations. This is where critical relativism comes in. Let us consider the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA), the outcome of the 4th United Nations World Conference on Women. It has 12 areas of concern, including human rights of women in power and decision-making, women and the economy, women and the environment, the girl-child and others. The PFA acknowledges that religion is used to justify gender-based violence and discrimination against women and LGBT persons. But it is a secular text, not a religious text. It recognizes the importance of local cultures and traditions, but because it is a document that privileges human rights, it recognizes that some forms of cultural practice are harmful. It says: “While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of

States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms" (para 9).

In other words, when there is a clash between universal rights and cultures and traditions, human rights must take precedence where the cultural tradition is deemed harmful. This may be considered by some as a political fundamentalism, because even in women's human rights documents, there is a privileging of a particular standpoint. How then to advance women's human rights among local communities? In many local communities, there is no buy-in, they are not necessarily persuaded. If you say, for example, "this is the Beijing Platform for Action, please read all the 12 critical areas of concern," they will be thinking, "what have my parents taught me, what are my value systems?" Or, "this particular statement does not seem to sit so well with something that I have been brought up or raised on." Therefore, we need to think of more creative, more intersectional, and more inclusive strategies.

Critical Relativist Strategies in Practice

As part of the research for my book, I interviewed LGBT-identifying individuals in same-sex partnerships about how they manage becoming queer and becoming religious. Although they have been taught to choose one or the other, most have figured out a way to bring the two together. They challenge religious interpretation and things they have been told since childhood by re-examining verses from the Quran, the Bible, or the Pali Canon. This is powerful because although it is easy to look at secular sources like the Yogyakarta Principles that talk about sexuality rights, it is more powerful to people of faith when you go back to religious sources to offer an alternative interpretation, for example, to show how the question of homosexuality may be treated differently. One of my research subjects, a gay Christian man, also emphasized that if we appreciate the Bible and the values of Jesus, then we can see how the values of Jesus are not so very different from human rights values.

In the context of Malaysia, I will take the issue of early, or child marriage among Muslim and indigenous communities as an example. The recent case of a 41-year-old Thai man taking an 11-year-old Malaysian girl as his third wife elicited several responses. We can see the following three positions. The man said, “although many people are against this marriage, I will not succumb to the pressure….Our marriage is permissible in Islam, even though it is against the law.” Girls not Brides, a global network working to combat early marriages for child rights uses research to demonstrate that early marriage is physically, psychologically, and emotionally harmful to girls. The Sisters in Islam, a Muslim feminist organization based in Malaysia challenges interpretations by the National Fatwa Council and male religious leaders that justify polygamy and child marriage. They note that while Prophet Muhammad had many wives, this was in the context of a specific time of war during which many women were vulnerable and widowed. They also point to specific guidelines in the Quran on how one should engage in polygamy or the marrying of up to, in the case of Malaysia, four wives. We have three different viewpoints and approaches. The Sisters in Islam uses not only secular sources, but also Quran verses to point out why marriages should be delayed for children.

Both and…

This is my challenge and invitation to you: how would you think through a rights-based as well as a faith-based response with regard to sexual harassment or gender-based violence? An intersectional approach does not just use the language of human rights, but also various spiritual faith traditions. This is important because faith traditions still matter in the context of Southeast Asia.

People often wonder what we should do with differences: we are not the same and many things separate us. For many people, differences divide. Differences are also used to divide—to rule and to conquer. But many, whether they are feminists, activists, or LGBTQ people, have in their own lives used this particular strategic method—of looking at more than one way to get around the problem so that they do not have to choose between an “either or” position. Instead, they can actually reconcile a “both and” position.

Comments and Questions

Professor **Chika Obiya** noted that both presenters point out how the term gender is translated into various languages. This is a very interesting and delicate question that we should be more sensitive to. It is very impressive that Dr. Bong uses the term not only equality, but also equity. It seems critical to be sensitive to both equality and equity, as equity gives us an important base for the real equality.

*Professor **Yoko Hayami** provided comments based on her research experience with ethnic communities in Thailand and her personal experience being raised in a Christian church in Japan. She noted a commonality between the two presentations in the "in-between" of something that is universal and something that is culturally based, or parochial, and that in a sense, socialist ideology could be a universal, or at least, it is a universal ideology for socialists. The following is a brief version of her comments.*

Applying Critical Relativism amid Various Universals

I have been inspired by your presentation both academically and personally. I was born into a Christian family, which is a very small minority in Japan. I was a very active Christian until my early 20s, when I stopped going to church. One of the strongest reasons that I stopped going was that I felt those in position to teach the gospel were often critical of a woman who wanted to do something that compromised her expected role as a woman, a daughter, or a wife. Although it does not have to be that way, the Japanese church is very much a Japanese-context church. My experience resonates with your description of universalism versus cultural relativism.

At the time, I often thought, "isn't there a way to just have a community of pure faith where gender is irrelevant?" But this is impossible, because we are all human and we are embodied, gendered bodies and persons in the Japanese cultural context, so it is impossible to make

gender irrelevant, obviously. This is where your ideas of spiritual gender or sexuality or gendered or sexual spirituality that you write about provide further insights. As both an objective analyst as well as a 当事者, or an actor in the midst/somebody involved, I find that the strategies you suggest, challenging religious interpretation, going back and forth between universalism and relativism, are very helpful.

What I learned from your emphasis on critical relativism and intersectionality is that we should look at gendered and sexualized religiosity and religious sexuality or gender within our context with a universalist in mind. One inspiring example is Dhammananda Bhikkhuni (originally Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) from Thailand, who began writing reinterpretations of Buddhist teachings as a professor and later ordained as a Buddhist nun and has built up her own temple.

But for most lay actors in the midst, 当事者, including my 20-something self, the example of Dhammananda Bhikkhuni is unattainable. How can we contend with those who teach us moral values based on their religious/spiritual expertise? For them, their position is universal. In a way, Christian faith itself takes itself as a universal for Christians. If so, for them, feminist human rights is something like a parallel universe that is difficult to approach. For them, gender and sexuality are all subsumed within the Christian doctrine and belief. How can we crack that hard shell and where can we start?

In your book you talk about the difference between diversity and plurality, and you use the two words in a different way, but plurality is the way that differences coexist. Going back to Christians who see only their own universal in the Christian belief, if there is plurality, other religions right by their side, they would be able to see more broadly. In that sense, diversity is critical, but it is actually very difficult to find in Japan.

Empowering Intersectionality

Some years ago, I wrote a book in Japanese titled *Differences and Connectivities* on minority ethnic groups in the hills of Thailand. I examined how discrimination was enhanced when ethnic

differences cross with gender differences, or in other words, intersectionality. I did not use that word, but I clearly found that minority women are discriminated in a different way. While I wanted to demonstrate how being at the intersection produces multiple burdens, it also can be fruitful, or it can lead to something that is unattainable if you stay in one category. In some ways, othering is enhanced, but at the same time, the person in the midst can find an open path. For example, an ethnic minority woman married to a Thai man because of certain power relationships finds new paths to connect with different persons that she would not have been able to if she had not been at that intersection. Intersection itself can be a place of severe discrimination, but also it may be fertile in some ways. How, then, to make intersectionality empowering for those in the midst?

Response

An actor in the midst is what I understand to be a socially marginal, not socially marginalized, but a socially marginal position where one can be both an insider and an outsider. For example, if you come from poor background, but through education, you have socially mobilized and you are now able to write about your own community. Then you are both an insider and an outsider and that in itself is an empowering position, because you write with some epistemological knowledge, you are writing from lived experience, you are writing from the heart, and then you have the know how to be able to theorize and to be able to be sense make sense of that for other people as well so I think that is very an empowering position, rather than to be writing totally from an outsider point of view, where you can you can write from a very clinical detached positivist position.

Questions

1. From my experience, critical relativist interpretations can be found among feminist legal scholars or Catholic critical scholars, but the real-life power structures that force interpretations upon everyone are still very much in place. I know that it is a process of negotiating all the time, but what are the opportunities for empowering this

intersectionality so that such kind of imposition of interpretations can be better resisted? I know that the Sisters in Islam has had to pay for challenging conventional religious interpretations, it is not without the threat of violence or paying the cost for that. Do you have stories about how these private faiths actually become public and what is the method of publicity in a sense?

2. Based on my experience, using the religious text, the Bible, to counter conventional interpretations, causes people to get angrier. To what extent do you see the possibility and potential in the approach you suggest and what kind of limitations do you expect?

3. What about the role that institutions have as an interpretive authority? What is especially troubling in Catholicism is that this main interpretational authority in terms of presenting legitimacy is the Pope. It lies within one person, as opposed to Protestantism, where layperson learn how to interpret the Bible, giving them the opportunity to search more for these faith-based approaches to interpreting their faith, where the Bible can accommodate you as a person. I think in Islam it is again different because you have religious leaders, but you also have states that claim interpretative authority, like Islamic states. One of the obstacles of reinterpreting religious texts in Malaysia is the Islamic bureaucracy that formerly takes on the role of religious interpretation. When it comes to faith-based interpretations, do we also need to distinguish religion as a faith and religion as it is attached to an institution?

Responses

Intersectionality or a critical relativist position does not always work in all situations. The last thing I want to do is to present it as *the* solution, it is *a* solution, it is one solution. It comes from analyzing the narratives of people who have found their own ways of making sense of A&B that seemed contradictory to many others, but they have found a way to sometimes bring the two together. Although I came up with a fancy word, people living real lives face a different challenge every day. It is a long road of struggle, with pain involved.

One needs to grab any and every opportunity, but feminists have always been very strategic. Sometimes you need to pass as conservative to be able to be invited to sit at the center. Today social media is also revolutionizing the way that we spread messages. The Sisters in Islam for example do not just speak to the press and release statements, they have a website and a social media presence. They speak on issues that are not just related to Muslim women, but also on the transgender community or *maknyah* as we call it in Malaysia, and the host of other related questions. All these issues are interrelated, gender issues are not divorced and do not exist in a bubble. All of these are issues have a way of coming back to the same problem. And that has to do with power dynamics, whether it is at home, in the workplace, or the larger society, and of course where the public brokers are in the government, the question of who is making the decisions on women's issues is also critical.

You bring up the important element, which is legitimacy. Whose interpretation counts, which interpretation counts more? For Catholics, the Vatican puts itself out as the arbiter of truth and correct interpretation. I am part of a group called the Ecclesia of Women in Asia, a group of Catholic feminist theologians. Every two years, we hold a conference in one Asian city. We select papers that are presented at the conference and publish them as a book with a publisher that will make them affordable and send them to institutions and faith communities. Whether we get invitations to write for a broader audience or to be interviewed by radio stations, I always try to say yes, because it is an opportunity to get different ideas out and stimulate conversations.