

# Forum: Searching for a Global Solidarity: A Collective Auto-Ethnography of Early-Career Women Researchers in the Asia-Pacific

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**Abstract:** This forum critically reflects on discrimination faced by early-career women international relations (IR) scholars in the Asia-Pacific region in their workplaces and beyond. By taking a self-ethnographic perspective, six contributors from five countries provide an engaging overview of difficulties they face in their everyday lives. Against the backdrop of this diverse and globalizing region, the contributors are all academic migrants in search of employment and learning opportunities within the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. They lead migratory lives by frequently crossing ideational and material boundaries to contribute to a more diverse IR knowledge base, and they encounter numerous difficulties and forms of discrimination. This forum has two aims. First, in reflecting on the contributors' own lived experiences, it highlights the diversity of issues faced by early-career women scholars in this region. Second, it calls for novel, more inclusive forms of solidarity that appreciates diversity as plurality across any divides.

**Resumen:** Este foro reflexiona de forma crítica sobre la discriminación a la que se enfrentan las investigadoras en materia de Relaciones Internacionales (RRII) de la región de Asia-Pacífico tanto en sus lugares de trabajo como fuera de los mismos. Desde una perspectiva autoetnográfica, seis investigadoras de cinco países diferentes ofrecen una interesante visión de las dificultades a las que se enfrentan en su vida cotidiana. Con esta región diversa y en proceso de globalización como telón de fondo, las investigadoras son todas migrantes académicas en busca de oportunidades de empleo y aprendizaje en la región de Asia-Pacífico y más allá de la misma. Llevan una vida migratoria cruzando con frecuencia las fronteras ideológicas y materiales para contribuir a una base de conocimientos de las RRII más diversa, y se encuentran con numerosas dificultades y formas de

discriminación. El objetivo de este foro es doble. En primer lugar, al reflexionar sobre experiencias vividas por las propias investigadoras, pone de manifiesto la diversidad de los problemas a los que se enfrentan las investigadoras que inician su carrera en esta región. En segundo lugar, hace un llamamiento a nuevas formas de solidaridad, más inclusivas, que aprecien la diversidad como pluralidad más allá de cualquier división.

**Résumé:** Ce forum souhaite apporter un regard critique sur les discriminations subies par des chercheuses en relations internationales en début de carrière dans la région Asie-Pacifique, sur leur lieu de travail et au-delà. Forte de leur point de vue auto-ethnographique, six contributrices issues de cinq pays proposent un tableau remarquable des difficultés auxquelles elles sont confrontées dans leur quotidien. Dans cette région diversifiée et mondialisée, les six chercheuses sont toutes des « migrantes universitaires » en recherche d'emploi et d'opportunités intellectuelles, dans la zone Asie-Pacifique et au-delà. Parce qu'elles franchissent fréquemment des frontières conceptuelles et physiques pour contribuer à diversifier le savoir en relations internationales, elles vivent des trajectoires migratoires, rencontrant un grand nombre de difficultés et formes de discrimination. Ce forum a deux objectifs. Tout d'abord, il vise à réfléchir aux expériences de vie des contributrices, soulignant la diversité des problèmes rencontrés par les chercheuses en début de carrière dans cette région du monde. Deuxièmement, il en appelle à de nouvelles formes de solidarité, plus inclusives, capables de valoriser la diversité et la pluralité au-delà des différences.

**Keywords:** early-career women scholars, Asia-Pacific, workplace, discrimination, solidarity, intersectionality

**Palabras clave:** investigadoras en inicio de su carrera, Asia-Pacífico, lugar de trabajo, discriminación, solidaridad, interseccionalidad

**Mots clés:** chercheuses en début de carrière, Asie-Pacifique, lieu de travail, discriminations, solidarité, intersectionnalité

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## Introduction

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Over the past decade, efforts to make international relations (IR) more global and, therefore, more diverse have been receiving wider attention in the discipline. With book series such as *Worlding beyond the West* mapping IR beyond Europe and North America (Tickner and Wæver 2009), and Amitav Acharya's assumption of the International Studies Association (ISA) presidency in 2014, the discipline seemed to open up to scholarship from beyond the West. Ever since, it has been increasingly acknowledged that non-Western actors not only engaged with Western scholarship but also actively shaped the discipline. It has been argued that to establish a global IR, it is necessary to incorporate not only post-Western empirical contributions but also their theoretical reflections (Acharya 2014; Acharya and Buzan 2019). Despite these advancements in recent years, Vineet Thakur and Karen Smith's (2021, 573)

assessment that “[t]he discussions about IR’s origins are still primarily limited to the West . . . even critical histories of the discipline tend to reinforce the centrality of issues that are formative but also at times limited to Western experiences” still holds true for the discipline at large. With some notable exceptions (Alejandro 2019), our understanding of the origins and developments of IR in regions beyond Europe and North America remains limited. This is particularly striking in the Asia-Pacific, which is expected to play a key role in globalizing IR (Acharya and Buzan 2007, 2017). Although this region is the second largest of its kind in terms of ISA members (Cook 2020), Acharya and Buzan’s observation (Acharya and Buzan 2019, 24) that prior to World War I, Japan was “generally marginalised or ignored in IR” applies not only to Japan in the twenty-first century, but also to the entire region.

To address this issue and to initiate a deeper understanding of how IR is practiced in the Asia-Pacific, contributors of this forum are asked to respond to the following guiding question: What does it mean to be a non-Western IR scholar in the Asia-Pacific today, when the rallying cry for globalizing and diversifying the discipline is becoming ever louder? We do so primarily from the standpoint of early-career women researchers, who are arguably at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. It may seem odd that recent theoretical contributions from the Asia-Pacific region are still predominantly limited to so-called national schools or national traditions (Qin 2007; Zhao 2009; Zhang 2012; Shih and Chen 2014; Rösch and Watanabe 2018). Being more state-centric than much of the scholarship currently produced in Europe suggests that IR in the Asia-Pacific may still be dominated by what L.H.M. Ling (2019) called “Hyper Masculine (Eurocentric) Whiteness,” which hampers opportunities for alternative theorizing from within, particularly from the bottom. Under these circumstances, critical theories (including feminism) that encourage scholars to reconsider unequal relations of power cutting across state or regional borders are disproportionately underrepresented in the IR knowledge produced in this region.

What, then, impedes the region’s further globalization and diversification? Contributors of this forum sketch the struggles of early-career women researchers at their workplaces. Furthermore, to thoroughly reconsider the issue of hypermasculinized Asia, the forum aims to encourage more IR academics to come forward and speak in their own words, as we do here. Our contributions, which collectively employ self-ethnographic, autobiographical methods of analysis (Vrasti 2008; Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Inayatullah 2011; Montsion 2018), reflect on personal experiences in IR academia in the Asia-Pacific region. As Naeem Inayatullah (2011, 5) puts it, we consider that autobiography can be a “source for exploring the past and anticipating the future” of our workplace, where knowledge of international politics is produced. In doing so, this forum builds on core feminist assumptions of the personal being political (Hanisch 2006). As researchers and teachers, we are well aware of the possible consequences of the exposure of the private to the public. The roundtable at the 2019 ISA Asia-Pacific Conference in Singapore that started our discussions concluded that being an early-career woman scholar is not the only characteristic that unites us in searching for a common solidarity. However, gender cannot be detached from our scholarly activity, as it is fundamentally defined in social relations. Since gender relations differ between cultures and societies, we do not believe that one feminism is shared across the Asia-Pacific. Like Cynthia Enloe (2013), we maintain that IR, the subject matter of IR, cannot be limited to formal relations between governments or policy makers. IR are built on numerous relations on different scales. We should become aware of the “micro moves” (Solomon and Steele 2017) that characterize the knowledge–power relations in our own everyday lives. As the discipline has come to incorporate more people from various backgrounds, discriminatory practices in the IR community cannot be understood by a single-axis analysis, as intersectionality has increased significantly (Crenshaw 1991). Only by acknowledging such complexity and subtlety are we capable of

understanding to what extent our own relations affect the knowledge we create about relations at the international level.

We are five early-career women academics and one mid-career male academic representing five countries in the region: India (Agarwal), Japan (Chen and Watanabe), Malaysia (Hoo), New Zealand (Choi), and the Philippines (Cruz). Acknowledging the risk of ill-considered grouping practices, we do not claim to represent all the difficulties women researchers experience in the region. Regardless of one's gender and career development, our cases are a call for solidarity among individual scholars resisting any state-centric, hypermasculine IR. Therefore, we include one contributor who is neither a woman nor an early entrant to the IR profession. By disclosing the personal, this forum suggests that people can better appreciate each other's subjectivity, allowing for further multidirectional border-crossing for the same purpose of empowering ourselves, and, ultimately, globalizing the discipline. We claim that no one, not just early-career women scholars, should be alienated in the workplace. In doing so, we can make our workplaces rich spaces of global knowledge production, no matter who we are or where we come from. Since our discussions are not limited to publishing but also cover teaching, this forum makes visible the struggles of a minority that is also an engine of globalizing IR. Our cases draw attention to the issue of hypermasculinized IR in the Asia-Pacific region that effectively hampers it in reaching its potential regarding globalizing and diversifying IR.

Focusing on everyday relations, this forum highlights our everyday practices to consider in what sense hypermasculinity creates discriminatory structures. Two points can be made here. First, discrimination often takes the form of alienation. While we share the space of/in the Asia-Pacific and the common attribute of being early-career woman researchers, we learned in our discussions that we experience issues of discrimination differently. This is not only because we are all different, both as scholars and as humans, and therefore situated in different positionalities. It is also because the discriminations we experienced are subtle, often unintentional, sometimes transversal, and therefore complex. They can take place within or without a smaller community or within a larger, more encompassing one. Atsuko Watanabe's example takes place in a domestic community, as her experience was in her university workplace. Ching-Chang Chen turns to his work and life experiences in Japan as an academic migrant from a former Japanese colony. Chiew-Ping Hoo touches on the male-dominated security studies community in Northeast Asia compared with Southeast Asia. Amya Agarwal discusses the alienation of early-career researchers in the IR community in India and beyond. Frances Cruz maintains we should not overlook the thematic and methodological hierarchies between qualitative and quantitative, positivist and non-positivist, or transnational flows of people and the international order. Finally, both Cruz and Hoo suggest that Western "common sense" deviates from the reality in Asian academia, as less "modernized" countries such as Malaysia and the Philippines arguably attain better gender equality in workplaces than more "modernized" ones such as South Korea and Japan. As our examples epitomize, various alienating practices are systemic and embedded in our scholarly communities, which are often lumped together under a series of binaries such as Western/non-Western, male/female, and state/non-state. These practices lead us to overlook diversity and unwittingly alienate people who do not fit into these binaries.

Second, the hypermasculinity that permeates our daily lives also manifests in our subject matter. We are mobile researchers with experiences of studying and/or working in "Western" and "Eastern" institutions who can be characterized, in the terminologies of Mathis Lohaus and Wiebke Wemheuer-Vogelaar (2021, 647, emphasis in original), as "*expats, returnees, or part of the diaspora,*" who "contribute to the globalization of IR research." While making such contributions, we face a series of bordering practices that less mobile researchers who tend to stay in one region

may not encounter. These borders do not only exist in terms of language, culture, and other material differences, as is usually assumed. For example, when we teach, we always ask ourselves: “How can Eurocentric IR theories and debates be interpreted into local contexts and taught in local classrooms understandably to our students?” In IR, key historical events in the development of modern IR (such as the Peace of Westphalia and the French Revolution) are European and therefore not directly our own (Powel 2021). Almost all key terminologies in IR are not from our own languages. How, then, can we convince our students (and ourselves) that foreign theories and concepts are still useful to understand our globalizing world while simultaneously avoiding the reproduction of intellectual subordination? Such awareness and concern might be shared widely among local teachers, mobile or otherwise. Thanks to our multilingual skills, these issues are more acutely recognized. When we write, we are often stuck in the middle of different literatures, questions, and debates in our own languages and in English. We belong to multiple local and international scholarly communities, which are likely to encompass different, sometimes even competing, practices, norms, and ways of developing argumentation. Additionally, most of us adopt critical perspectives, which are marginalized, if not entirely silenced, in the region.

These questions and issues require mobile researchers to cross borders, literally every day. Under the state-centric Asian/Western IR, and even in the extant global IR literature, such struggles that diversify the discipline’s knowledge production on an everyday basis are rarely recognized. Hence, in what follows, we share our personal experiences to make these efforts visible.

## **How to Stay Well: Reflections on Precarity and Vulnerabilities in the Indian Academic Context (in IR and Beyond)**

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The early-career research phase is challenging part of an academic career. This is the transitional period between receiving a PhD and obtaining a permanent position. During this period, a researcher is expected to deliver maximum output in terms of publications, presentations, lectures, and networking. Available job opportunities in this phase are mainly temporary, including ad hoc positions, research associations, and postdoctoral fellowships, which usually last anywhere between six months and multiple years. While in one of these temporary job positions, the early-career researcher is aged thirty to forty years (on average), and this is the time in which they have young children or start planning families. Due to the uncertainty and insecurity of job procurement, researchers find themselves grappling with high levels of stress and anxiety. The situation becomes even more difficult for women researchers, especially those who are caregivers for children and/or elderly people. These realities have been further emphasized by research findings on the academic productivity of women researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The severity of its impact on women’s research time is represented by a drastic reduction in the number of journal submissions (Flaherty 2020; Kitchener 2020). Such findings highlight not only women’s deep involvement in the domestic sphere, but also the lack of adequate childcare and other support systems enabling women to continue working in such crises (Fattore et al. 2020; Crawford and Windsor 2021). Furthermore, the situation of single parents, especially single mothers, is far worse and is often overlooked.

The focus here is not the pandemic per se, but the overall problem of precarity in academia and how it affects early-career women researchers on many levels. The impact of domestic pressures and career uncertainty on the mental health and emotional well-being of women researchers is not a new phenomenon. Studies show cases of suicide and mental health issues becoming common trends among academics (Bira, Evans, and Vanderford 2019). The problem is grave, yet very few discussions are held around this issue. A number of international conferences are centered on critical and feminist perspectives on global politics, but the issue of precarity in academia is seldom discussed. In general, academia is premised on the myth of moral and ethical superiority to nonacademic professions. The reproduction of such false impressions conceals the problems entailed in academic careers, especially in the early stages. IR scholars have written about the importance of kindness and compassion in the competitive, petty academic environment (Schulz 2020). Drawing inspiration from such accounts of compassionate practices in academia, I explore the challenges and vulnerabilities of early-career women researchers in academia (in IR and beyond) and reflect on how an empathetic approach from academic communities can alleviate some of these problems. In doing so, I present a short personal reflection on precarity and other challenges in the Indian academic context and how a sense of belonging in the academic community can offer an antidote to the alienation felt by women researchers. This reflection intersects with the societal context, in line with this forum's focus on the lived experiences of early-career women scholars in IR. This is because career navigation in IR, or in academia in general, is not isolated from societal expectations and pressures, especially for women scholars.

My observations are based on a long period (2003–2019) of studying and teaching political science at a prestigious university in India. At this university, IR is studied and taught only as a subdiscipline of political science. Although I speak from a political-science/IR perspective, these observations may overlap with the realities of other fields in the social sciences. It is also important to point out that my perspective is shaped by my positioning in the Indian society as an upper caste, middle-class Hindu woman. Challenges and vulnerabilities are, to a large extent, influenced by the religion, caste, and class of a student/academic. Thus, making generalizations regarding these experiences is difficult.

Speaking from my own experience, before starting undergraduate studies, a student lives in the bubble of conditioning provided by their parents, extended family, and social circles. For the first time after school, an undergraduate student learns about the existence of different perspectives and ways of living. For some students (especially in the humanities stream), this ignites a curiosity and eagerness to learn more about other people, their identities, and their politics. Postgraduate courses, especially in the social sciences, provide a much-needed avenue to read, discuss, and debate a plethora of topics and themes. This fascination, combined with a lingering hunger for knowledge, drives students to take up careers in research and academia. However, it is not a very popular choice in the Indian context, where parents prefer to see their children (mostly sons) making a quick transition from their studies to getting a job. The long haulers not only go through career difficulties but also endure pressure from their families to get a “proper job.” For women, a teaching job is considered favorable due to shorter working hours that are conducive to family life. Therefore, the number of women enrolled in MPhil and PhD programs is on the high side.

As a woman aspiring to a career in research, I enrolled myself in an MPhil course and later in a PhD course. My family was particularly encouraging due to the supposed possibility of a good work–life balance in the future. Things are much different in reality. During and after the PhD thesis-writing process, many candidates teach in ad hoc positions. These temporary positions are the first step in an academic career and attract several aspirants every year. Having worked as an ad hoc

employee for two and a half years, I can testify to the high teaching workload of almost twenty hours a week. One is compelled to teach papers that may not have anything to do with one's research expertise. The burdensome workload also includes clerical work, which causes emotional and physical exhaustion for young researchers and limits their abilities and space for creative thinking (Keshavmurthy and Thomas 2020). Furthermore, no provision is made for childcare in these positions. Additionally, moving into a permanent position is not guaranteed. Some employees continue working on an ad hoc basis in the hope of permanent recruitment, which is often delayed for years.

On a different note, women often struggle with marital issues or endure severe forms of exploitation in the workplace. While at home, the gendered division of labor does not favor women, the situation at work is no better. There have been several cases of women MPhil and PhD students being sexually harassed by male supervisors (Singh 2015). Like other academic contexts, complete dependency on MPhil and PhD supervisors for career advancement exists in India (Ramakrishnan 2018). Sometimes, power relations and hierarchies are also upheld and reinforced by women supervisors. For example, supervisors recruit students for projects without remuneration, expect them to teach lectures, and complete their evaluation work. Due to the gendered overall power structure, young women (and sometimes men) constantly have to negotiate in order to survive in academia and protect their careers (Tiway and Sriraman 2017).

In such an unequal, discriminatory, and sexualized academic environment, alienation and discontent are common among young women researchers. The disillusionment with a research-oriented career increases even more due to the lack of a platform for expressing grievances. Due to the competitive nature of academia, finding a community for support and solidarity can be challenging.

In the context of ever-increasing alienation in academia, it is all the more important to find ways of addressing the implicit everyday challenges faced by young women scholars. At a broad level, Western IR academia has some avenues for addressing these issues, such as conference workshops. A good example is the ISA Pay it Forward workshop, which aims to provide a platform for women to receive guidance on navigating the professional and personal hurdles in academia. However, in terms of attending these workshops, women scholars from the Asia-Pacific region face several challenges—mainly involving funding and visas to attend annual ISA conventions, which are always held in the United States or Canada. If a scholar is able to attend, they are overburdened by the demands on their time, as they bring diverse perspectives to the conversations. Although grounded in good-faith efforts at diversification, such workshops are challenged and limited in terms of extending meaningful support. As a participant in the 2017 Pay it Forward workshop in Baltimore, I found the workshop inadequate for women researchers in the Global South. The discussions were primarily suited to a Western context (or an American audience, to be precise), without much attention being paid to the diversity of experiences. My enthusiasm for attending the workshop I had been anticipating for months dampened, and as a disillusioned participant, I often found myself struggling to make sense of the conversations in the workshop. Thus, it is necessary to form a focused collaborative or a community that focuses on diversity, addresses grievances, and empowers early-career women scholars through an exchange of shared experiences. The feminist groups in IR circles are a close-knit community providing support to women from different backgrounds. However, this is sometimes limited mainly to women working on feminist issues. I enjoyed being part of the executive committee in the Feminist Theory and Gender Section at ISA that genuinely works toward the goal of inclusivity in IR for women from different regions. Additionally, it provides a space for developing lifelong friendships and bonds with fellow feminists. Such communities have a huge potential to provide much-needed support to women scholars. However,

even within significant solidarity initiatives, it is necessary to reflect constantly on whose voices are being amplified and whose voices are overlooked. With such reflections in mind and moving beyond strict disciplinary and even research boundaries, the 2019 ISA Asia-Pacific initiative is the result of a bond created through shared pain and the challenges of women in the early stages of their career, specifically in the Asia-Pacific region. Practicing kindness through exchanging encouraging emails, checking in on each other (especially during the pandemic), sharing childcare challenges, and expressing solidarity are some characteristics we envision for a community where women scholars from Asia can find support and empower themselves.

## Politicizing the Personal

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The personal is political. This is the title of an article written by Carol Hanisch, an American feminist known for initiating protests against the Miss America pageant in 1968. As she wrote in 2006, this title was interpreted and reinterpreted into many languages, becoming a feminist creed (Hanisch 2006). However, it only recently gained wider attention in Japan. The incident that triggered more widespread protests in Japan was a series of scandals in 2018 related to medical schools' admission processes. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, it was discovered that more than ten institutions had faked entrance examination results for years to reduce the number of women and older entrants. Following these scandals, Chizuko Ueno, a well-known feminist trailblazer in Japan, gave a speech at the entrance ceremony of the prestigious University of Tokyo in the spring of 2019. In this speech, Ueno (2019) sparked a huge debate by accusing the university of persistent discriminatory practices against women.

I accepted these developments almost as a personal matter. However, this was not necessarily because I was an early-career researcher. In fact, strictly speaking, I am not. I migrated from one occupation to another searching for a better workplace suited to my life path and hopes. That is, I am at the beginning of my career in academia. Like many women in many countries, my life has been characterized by family affairs for which I must take responsibility as a daughter, wife, and mother. Before becoming an academic, I worked as a writer for a Japanese newspaper for over a decade. When my husband moved to the United States for his work, I had to quit my job to take care of our two children. I have no regrets about doing so, as I experienced so-called maternity harassment, a Japanese neologism for unsavory workplace practices aimed against women who become pregnant or take time off to care for their children (McCurry 2015). I already felt it difficult to continue my career as a journalist. In the United States, I obtained a master's degree to rebuild my career, which unexpectedly led me to gain a PhD in the United Kingdom. While shuttling back and forth between Japan and the United Kingdom, I had to take care not only of my children but also of my ailing mother, who passed away in 2018. Upon finishing my PhD thesis, I started working in Japanese academia and finding a few part-time research and teaching posts. Initially, I had some hope that the scholarly world would be more liberal than the media. However, I soon realized it was actually worse. In one case, I had to leave a university post after I filed a complaint for unfair treatment in the workplace, but the university did not accept my claim as reasonable. Ueno's speech explained well what I had been experiencing in these two different professional worlds. I felt the fundamental issue was not the choice of occupation but my gender in Japanese society, which I thought was impossible to overcome.

Japan is one of the first non-Western countries that successfully localized Western social sciences. In the context of IR, as [Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan \(2019\)](#) maintain, Japan was part of the Western core whose diplomatic practices were developed into IR theory. Like in Western countries, IR already started evolving as a discipline in Japan before World War II ([Ninomiya 1964](#)). Despite, or rather due to, these facts, Japanese academia is extremely exclusive, not only for women but also for early-career researchers in general, as numerous recent reports from both media and inside the community demonstrate. There are several reasons. First, universities are under the influence of Japanese management culture, in which life-long employment is still the standard. Second, as the rigid hierarchy of university rankings (the pinnacle of which is the University of Tokyo) endures, partly because of the immobility of the workforce, hierarchical relations are accepted as a norm in universities. The third and fourth reasons are deeply historical. The regret of scientists who contributed to the war made them rather detached not only from the government but also from society ([Kasuga 2021](#)). Finally, many disciplines, particularly in the social sciences, are self-enclosed internationally, as Japan, an early importer of Western academic knowledge, has developed its own literature in the native language, and the main discussions in these disciplines are not necessarily in alignment with Western ones. Consequently, the postwar Japanese scholarly world restored its state-centric masculinity.

Postdoctoral research is relatively new in Japan, first introduced in the 1990s as the government implemented a policy prioritizing postgraduate education over undergraduate education. This was intended to restore the country's identity as a scientific and technological powerhouse ([Motomura 2009](#); [Kobayashi 2017](#)). However, the policy did not reform the existing structure, and no established system of teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs) comparable to that in Europe and North America exists today ([Japanese Association for the Improvement of Conditions of Women Scientists \[JAICOWS\] 2021](#); [Kuwabara 2021](#)). Moreover, in contradiction to its hope of reinvigorating scientific research in the country, the government has been cutting education budgets in recent decades ([Kobayashi 2017](#)) to push universities to employ more part-time teachers. As companies prefer training their employees to fit into their specific corporate culture, which is also the brain-child of the Japanese management system, they often avoid hiring postdocs who are too highly educated. In other words, having a higher degree is often a disadvantage in the Japanese private sector.

The situation is even more dire for women PhDs. In Japan, domestic work is still considered to be women's work, meaning that women are likely to work part-time in precarious positions. According to a government survey, 54.4 percent of women workers were part-time in 2020 ([Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office 2021](#)). A 2014 survey suggests that 52 percent of teachers in Japanese universities are part-timers with a salary of 10–20 percent that of regular teachers. Of these teachers, 60 percent are women, and the majority's annual income is well below \$15,000 ([JAICOWS 2021](#)). It is easy to imagine how this situation further solidifies the hierarchical structure of Japanese academia, mentally trapping many early career researchers and making any serious efforts to overcome the gap seem meaningless, given its size. In 2019, *The Asahi Shimbun* reported that a 43-year-old specialist on Japanese thought committed suicide after being unable to obtain a full-time post despite her exceptional research attainments ([Asahi Shimbun April 10, 2019](#)). While her fate made national headlines, it only temporarily raised awareness of the dire situation of part-time early-career scholars.

My situation was far better than hers, but it was still bad enough to affect my mental health. The border I was facing seemed insurmountable to me. In Japanese universities, regular teachers are called *sensei*, an honorific term meaning a person born before another. Teachers refer to each other using this term as a practice among colleagues, whereas it is a bewildering custom even in Japanese society

outside of academia. In one workplace, nobody ever addressed me as *sensei*, which made me realize I was not considered a colleague by full-time scholars. The border distinguishing me from them was not what I achieved as a scholar or even as a human being, as the original meaning of the term suggests, but exclusively our different forms of employment. Coincidentally, I lost my mother during the time I worked for the university. As I experienced unfair treatment from my colleagues, I was mentally pushed to the limit to the extent that I was diagnosed with a mental disorder. To save myself from this impasse, I knocked on the door of the university counseling room to ask for mediation for a conversation with my colleagues. However, the attempt was a failure. I waited the entire summer and beyond for a reply from my boss, but nothing happened, making me realize that even having discussions to solve issues is difficult. Ultimately, he encouraged me to leave the post. However, I was lucky enough to become a full-time worker as soon as I left this workplace. I found a position because of my unusual career path. As the TA and RA system is lacking in Japan, early-career researchers have few opportunities to train themselves. In contrast, I already had experience in the media. Additionally, I teach and conduct research in both English and Japanese. I suffered from the exclusive university structure. However, simultaneously, as a stranger in Japanese academia, I was a destructive force of its outdated customs. Paradoxically, I was saved by the very structure that hurt me.

Based on my experience, then, I suggest two lessons. The first is for the Japanese government. I will put it briefly, as the aim of this forum is to open a discussion among scholars and not to propose policy suggestions. Part-timers must be treated as equals, as they form the majority of the scholarly community and account for more than half of all teachers. Universities should stop using part-timers as a buffer. The most important point in this context is filling the unacceptable wage gap. The second point is related to the topic of the forum, namely that I want to raise the question of who created the problematic structures. In discussing my experience, my aim is not to portray myself as a victim, but to question who the aggressor was and who the victim was in this rapidly transforming workplace. In fact, one colleague who had trouble with me was non-Japanese and was an outsider who probably felt alienated like I did. From his position, potentially, as a native I was the more privileged one. In other words, when a closed society is forced to open, anyone can be alienated.

This indicates that the structure that made me suffer is our own product for which we are all responsible, consciously or unconsciously. In this structure, it is not always clear who is more advantaged, and even seemingly privileged people live in anxiety. I am called *sensei* today because I gained a full-time post. It could be said that struggling was a necessary step on my career path that everyone must go through. But was it? My past grievance is someone's present and forgetting will solidify the unfair structure in which I was trapped. As a stranger to the slowly globalizing Japanese academia, I unwittingly held a privileged position to become a *sensei* faster than others. However, this indicates that I can be a source of disruption for someone else. Any borders and boundaries of our time are unclear, gradational, multiple, and movable, and they are perceived differently by each of us. This complexity might be more acute in IR-related faculties, as faculty members are supposed to be "international." In such a bewildering situation, small emotional outbursts can cause issues, as people are not sure of their whereabouts. Some of my own most disturbing experiences relate to women colleagues, who advised me that I should "become an adult" and forget this unhappy yet banal incident in academia. Unfortunately, they were absolutely right, given the vast number of part-timers. However, it was this shyness of people that made me suffer the most, and it may even be seen as systemic discrimination, which resembles contemporary racism. According to the American philosopher [Harvey Mansfield \(2020\)](#), systemic racism "describes a society that is so little racist that no one can

respectably advocate racism, yet so much racist that every part of it is soaked with racism.” Although they acknowledge the issue, people avoid hurting others. None of them think they are doing something discriminatory, but rather showing sympathy to both sides, as Mansfield highlights. They might feel guilty as one of the privileged, but for that reason, both men and women keep silent, and “step aside [from] the system they denounce” (Mansfield 2020). In a world where not all of us are sure which side we are on, we can easily contribute to discriminatory practices unknowingly.

This unintentionality must be exposed. In her speech, Ueno emphasized the social structure in which women’s wings are clipped. She said the world that awaits new women students might be a place where nothing works out for them, even though they work hard. The golden rule of “no pain, no gain” might not be true in the real world. Ueno encouraged students to acknowledge that their ability to believe this rule is itself a privilege. They could put faith in their potential because they were raised in a privileged environment and not just because of their own hard work (Ueno 2019). Not long after Ueno’s speech, a former president of the University of Tokyo expressed his opposition, arguing that those who passed the examinations worked hard independently (Daily Shincho 2019). However, no one is independent of society. What he identified through his male gaze as “independence” is socially given and can only exist through women’s support and, indeed, dependence. This structure of formal/informal interdependence is rarely clarified, as people depoliticize the personal in indeterminacy. As a result, they avoid talking about the issue, allowing problematic structures to persist.

How can we break free from these persistent problems? After the 2019 ISA Asia-Pacific Conference, I had a chance to listen to another one of Ueno’s lectures at Aoyama Gakuin University at the invitation of Kumiko Haba, who supported us in organizing our roundtable and chaired it. One of Haba’s students said she feared being emotional when talking about her gender, and she asked Ueno how she could overcome emotion to fight for her rights rationally. Without hesitation, Ueno replied: “Is being emotional bad?” It is personal anger that has made Ueno—and, certainly, myself—keep moving forward to overcome boundaries. My intention is not to affirm the power of negative feelings, but to insist that these feelings, like positive emotions, emerge only out of human interactions. To turn negative feelings into positive ones, these interactions must be turned into communication. We can do so only by politicizing the banal, the everyday, the personal and by speaking out about our anxiety.

## **“Where Are the Women” in Japanese IR Research and Education (and Why Should I Care)?**

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I was immersed in the mainstream IR curriculum at two Taiwanese universities until my mid-20s. Thanks to Taiwan’s compulsory military service, I had been stationed on a small island near the People’s Republic as a low-ranking army officer, and I came to realize that what I had studied regarding politics and IR did not solve my questions stemming from the hostile relationship between these two political entities. Therefore, doing a PhD in the United Kingdom was as much about writing a doctoral dissertation as about unlearning many problematic key concepts and the hidden assumptions and power relations that make them possible (Bilgin and Ling 2017; Rösch 2017). Since graduation, I have spent twelve years in Japan teaching

critical security studies and East Asian IR. From my observations as a participant in Japanese higher education and academic research on IR, one of the primary issues worthy of concern is the profound underrepresentation and marginalization of women scholars in these institutions.

A vivid example is the 2018 Japanese Political Science Association annual conference (JPSA 2018). A friend of mine took a picture during the conference reception and noticed that the people (himself included) participating in a toast at that moment were all men.<sup>1</sup> This is in sharp contrast with my teaching experience at two Japanese universities. More women have been taking my IR modules than male students, and overall, they fare better than their male counterparts. Regardless of gender, the low percentage of Japanese college graduates proceeding to the master's level suggests they may not find an academic or research career tempting. According to the [Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology \(MEXT 2017, 4\)](#), only 11 percent of undergraduates went on to graduate school (and only 2.5 percent of social science graduates) in 2016. However, this does not really explain why I have so few fellow tenured women academics in the country.

In fact, the problem of women's underrepresentation and marginalization is not limited to IR but can be observed in various disciplines and professions. As mentioned in Watanabe's contribution, a scandal in Japan in 2018 involved various universities' long-term systematic rigging of their medical school entrance examination results at the expense of women entrants (McCurry 2019). After all, the IR community is not isolated from society at large. Rather than building "a society in which every woman shines" (*"subete no josei ga kagayaku shakai"*), as the former Abe administration promised (Miura 2019)—incidentally, the Japanese pronunciation of "shine" means "to go to hell" in Japanese—women have been in effect reduced by the government to an underexploited resource for tackling Japan's labor shortage and depopulation (Crawford 2021). Similarly, a former prime minister openly commented that having too many "talkative" women participate in decision-making processes would slow down board meetings (Rich 2021). This is reminiscent of Agarwal's experience of academic hierarchy that goes hand in hand with a gendered division of labor under which housework and childcare belong almost exclusively to women, in particular early-career women scholars.

The consequences of senior male professors' dominance in Japanese IR research and education are not difficult to imagine. Since gender is at best treated as a variable (Weber 2021, chapter 5) and at worst dismissed as "non-IR," it is rather understandable that IR in Japan remains largely state-centric, patriarchal, and focused on national security. Essentially, it is a derivative discourse of mainstream American IR (for a recent exception, see [Minamiyama and Maeda 2022](#)). As a result, when some Japanese researchers looked for inspiration on alternative IR theorizing some years ago, they turned to the English School, a prime example of Eurocentric IR theory that defends the "expansion" of European international society as the peaceful enlargement of gentlemen's club (Chen 2012). I also find that many students in Japan tend to equate international studies (IS) with learning English. When asked how they relate their studies to their career plans, my women students usually reply that their dream is to become flight attendants so they can use English at work. IR professors in Japan (myself included) cannot claim innocence regarding this poverty of career imagination.

To understand why Japanese IR research and education has become the way it is, it is necessary to recognize that oppression often takes intersecting forms that work together to produce injustice (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000 [1990]). It is also necessary to reflect on how my own positionality as a Western-trained, English-speaking,

<sup>1</sup> Some incremental changes have been taking place. The Association now has a "Female Researcher Participation Study Working Group," and a survey on women's participation in the JPSA conferences, experiences of harassment, and ideas for empowerment was conducted in August 2020.

foreign but Asian, middle-aged male tenured faculty member-cum-academic migrant in Japan from a former Japanese colony works to reproduce certain structures of the unwanted status quo while destabilizing others. Unlike their South Korean and Taiwanese counterparts whose IR-related university institutions are largely dominated by US-trained PhDs, the majority of Japanese IR academics receive their doctorate in Japan (Inoguchi 2010). Informed by Bourdieu's (1990) "thinking tools" in terms of capital, field, and habitus, I see Japanese IR as a field within Japanese academia, with its own rules of the game, namely a "generative grammar" (deciding "that's IR for you"), from hiring and publishing practices to funding decisions (Chen 2022). More social, cultural, and symbolic capital can be accrued and spent by a particular type of homegrown PhD (specifically those graduated from the seven former Imperial Universities or a few elitist private universities such as Keio and Waseda) than Western-educated scholars when struggling for jobs, resources, and authority claims. Moreover, given the field's positivist grammar, postcolonial studies is deemed partisan and "non-IR." Although my Welsh PhD and critical IR background entail that I lack the aforementioned capital and tend to have difficulties in securing funding from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, my gender and my ability to teach English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses means I am still more privileged than many early-career women scholars in the local academic job market, especially in institutions offering English-taught degree programs.

However, IR being taught in English by a non-white Asian professor does not quite conform to the common image of the "international" in Japan that, more often than not, means IR-EMI courses are supposed to be taught by white native English speakers (if not, then by experienced, usually male, Japanese professors) (Matsuoka 2015). This unspoken supposition is itself a legacy of national identity construction in pre-1945 Japan, where elements of the technologically advanced "West" can be selectively absorbed into the morally superior "Japan," which in turn casts itself as the fatherly leader of all nascent (and oppressed) Asian nations grappling with modernity (Tanaka 1993). The self-image of "Japan as Asia's number one" continues to linger; it explains why the technician who set up the washing machine in my flat on my arrival at my previous institution thought I was hired to teach Taiwanese students there (in fact, my students have been predominantly non-Taiwanese international students and, since April 2015, Japanese students). As almost half the university's student body comes from other parts of the world, the campus has been a local attraction for school-age children and their teachers. They look for international faculty and students to respond to their questionnaires and to practice English conversation. During my service there, I was never approached by these visitors, as I looked just like one of them and was, therefore, not the right target for an interview. The experience of being gazed at (and exempted) reminds me of the "Human Pavilion Incident" at the 1903 National Industrial Exhibition in Osaka, which displayed the customs and lifestyles of some "natives" from within the Japanese Empire and without, including indigenous people from colonial Taiwan (Yoshimi 2010 [1992]). In the age of imperialism and colonialism, such "human exhibitions" were not unusual as the metropolitan center searched for exotic differences to affirm the imperial self-identity. To be sure, I have not experienced race or ethnicity-based discrimination since the start of my academic career in Japan, and I believe this is partly because those I have encountered understand that such discrimination has no empirical and normative grounds. At the same time, my Japanese-like appearance and the "Taiwan boom" (from its food to the female president to the transgender digital minister) might have saved me from some unpleasant, if not dangerous, encounters.

The notion of intersectionality helps to make visible that the plight of early-career women scholars and my work and life experiences in Japan, both positive and negative, are made possible by the same intersecting structures, of which patriarchy is

just one. What should be done to make Japanese IR academia truly inclusive for early-career women scholars? To begin with, this requires the government to fundamentally change its policies regarding women. It also requires society to abandon the gendered division of labor and the academic community to recognize its gender bias, from hiring practices to knowledge production. As stated in Hoo's contribution (see also Windsor and Theis 2021), men can do much to help promote women scholars. No cultural essentialist or Orientalist explanations for gender inequality are needed in Japanese IR academia or society at large. The notorious Japanese sexism and patriarchy is a product of Meiji modernity and, as such, neither "natural" nor immutable.

I will also add that promoting greater solidarity with scholars at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, whether in Japan, the Asia-Pacific region, or elsewhere, has an ethical bearing on what it means to be a member of the epistemic community to which one belongs. As noted in Watanabe's contribution and mine, no one is morally more deserving than others regarding the available resources and privileges, since how they are obtained can be highly contingent on circumstances, and one's positionality is not entirely of one's own making (Rawls 1999 [1971]). In the Japanese context, the next steps should include the decolonization of Japanese IR as a field, as its "generative grammar" that puts foreign-trained PhDs and non-Western academic migrants in a disadvantaged position is the same grammar that prohibits early-career women scholars from excelling and fulfilling their intellectual potential.

## Multiple Experiences of Early-Career Women IR Professionals: A Malaysian Perspective

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A perennial issue plaguing IR is the underrepresentation of women scholars in the profession. As noted in a 2005 survey of the IR profession, none of the top twenty-five scholars in IR were women (Peterson, Tierney, and Maliniak 2005). In a more thorough survey of women IR professionals within the ISA, Fattore (2019) emphasized the institutional and social factors impeding the advancement of women IR professionals. Were the ideas and work of women IR scholars not up to the mark or were they not being taken seriously? Is the entire IR discipline gendered to the point that most of its analytical concepts and theories can only be expressed via the ideas and work of male IR scholars? Are there specific institutional or social factors impeding the advancement of women IR scholars? To answer these questions, a more sustained inquiry than this short piece is required. However, it can be asked what kind of career-related issues women IR scholars face, particularly in the early stage of their careers. Therefore, I would like to begin by exploring this question from multiple perspectives in a global context and from my own experience as a senior lecturer in East Asian security studies at the National University of Malaysia (UKM).

As an early-career woman IR professional from Malaysia, I have had numerous opportunities to experience different academic cultures. I experienced Malaysian academic culture while studying for my bachelor's degree in IR at the UKM, where I currently hold a teaching position. I experienced "Western" culture during my PhD studies at La Trobe University in Australia. Additionally, I have engaged in South Korean/Northeast Asian research for about ten years, and I specialize in security issues on the Korean Peninsula. These are the three settings in which I have gained personal exposure to different academic cultures. I have also conducted research

in most Northeast and Southeast Asian countries and presented my research in different regions.

While most comparisons of the experiences of women IR scholars are typically between Western and non-Western experiences, the diversity among non-Western women IR professionals should be also highlighted. In what follows, I compare and contrast my experiences in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia in discussing the experiences of women IR professionals using an autoethnographic approach.

Let me begin by sharing an anecdote. As I was walking toward the conference room for a panel at the 2019 ISA Asia-Pacific Conference, I was asked by a male colleague, “Why a roundtable focusing on women scholars? Why not a panel on male IR scholars?” His attitude was not surprising, as my friend did not realize that there was a male panelist at this roundtable in addition to an encouraging number of male attendees. However, what made me reflect further was that while some women scholars might have been offended by the question, I was not offended at all. In fact, I felt comforted. I thought the basis of my colleague’s reaction was that the presence of women has always been a fixture of his IR academic environment, which is, of course, laudable. At the same time, the question could also be viewed as dismissive, as if the gender issue in IR was not worthy of further exploration, although I did not think of it this way. Nevertheless, the question underscored that when the gender issue within the IR profession is discussed, the female gender is usually categorized as part of “diversity,” while the male gender is the predominant given and what is “common” or to be expected. This trend is strong in Northeast Asia, particularly South Korea and Japan. I have had extensive interactions with women IR scholars in this region and have observed their career patterns and struggles. As Chen has suggested, women scholars are profoundly underrepresented in IR research and in higher education in the region.

In the case of Northeast Asia, attention should be paid to the need for the self- and/or collective empowerment of women professionals, both at the individual and at the institutional/policy levels. The gender imbalance in IR has given rise to the “manel” phenomenon, where conferences or forum panels consist entirely of male speakers, discussants, and moderators. This is particularly evident at Korean Peninsula security-related events. The dearth of women scholars on Korea-related security panels prompted then-*Washington Post* journalist Anna Fifield to create a list of the world’s women experts on Korea and Japan security issues. At the time of her writing, only 267 women were listed (Fifield 2018). This extreme gender imbalance is also reflected in the IR departments at Korean universities. When I began my research about ten years ago, each IR department had only one woman faculty member. The gender balance in IR departments at Korean universities has improved but not the gender balance at government-organized forums.

In contrast, although Southeast Asia is viewed as economically less developed and is still regarded as part of the developing world, the region not only has an encouraging number of prominent women IR scholars but also notable high-level women policymakers in the traditional “hard” and “masculine” security professions, such as defense ministries and national security agencies. At the previously mentioned roundtable in Singapore, I could relate to Cruz (also in this forum) whose positions were most like mine, especially when the panelists discussed the issue of IR workplace discrimination. In terms of “Western” and Northeast Asian experiences, gender discrimination emerges as one of the most significant phenomena, while in terms of Southeast Asian experiences, local culture and institutional factors emerge as either movers or impeters for women IR professionals.

The Philippines can take pride in two highly esteemed women professors who also founded IR professional organizations, Carolina G. Hernandez and Aileen S.P. Baviera (until her untimely death from COVID-19 in 2020). Cruz herself is also president of a new IR association, the Philippine International Studies Organization (PHISO). Here in Malaysia and at my university, it is becoming the norm for women

IR scholars to assume senior or leadership positions in IR departments or research institutes. Zarina Othman, a senior woman IR academic and an expert on human and drug trafficking in Myanmar, is the current head of my center. The former director of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies at the UKM, Rashila Ramli, specializes in human security and led the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals project for Malaysia. She currently serves as principal project leader on national projects while continuing to nurture new generations of IR professionals in a personal and professional capacity.

Furthermore, in my postgraduate teaching and supervising experiences in Malaysia, women tended to outnumber men, indicating that not much of a basis exists for the perception that IR and security issues are predominantly “masculine” subjects, appropriate only for male students. As women, young or senior, in Malaysia can pursue their careers to greater heights, the issue of discrimination may seem less urgent or dramatic.

However, women IR academics in Malaysia and Southeast Asia face other issues. As observed by [Kim, Fitzsimons, and Kay \(2018\)](#), women are expected to empower themselves (leaning on and supporting each other) while taking on responsibilities based on societal, cultural, and workplace expectations. Like Agarwal’s case in India, young women IR professionals in Malaysia are affected by their marital status and social roles. Malaysia is a socially conservative Muslim-majority country (with a substantial number of non-Muslim Chinese and Indians, along with other native and aboriginal ethnic groups), and women are encouraged to get married early and bear the primary responsibility for rearing children ([Maimunah and Mariani 2008](#)). Take my colleagues and students, for example. The vast majority—if not all—of my women colleagues and students who are government officials in the defense and security sectors are also mothers and wives. While caring for their families, they also strive to do their best in their careers. They must often balance work, study, and caring for their family, with very little personal time. Little governmental or institutional support exists for these women professionals juggling multiple roles ([Kim, Fitzsimons, and Kay 2018](#)). Even though Malaysian women IR scholars face relatively few institutional obstacles in career advancement, wider societal attitudes are still patriarchal. While women professionals can advance in IR as well as the defense and security sectors, they are less likely to be accepted as *leaders* in these sectors.

In Northeast Asian countries, and sometimes in the more advanced OECD countries, where higher GDP and per capita performance are supposedly associated with gender equality ([Fortin 2005](#)), different gender discrimination issues—such as unequal pay and sexual harassment—continue to exist ([Jütting et al. 2008](#); [Cohen and Shinwell 2020](#)). Strong legislation is needed to elevate the status of women so that it is comparable to that of men. A more challenging approach would be creative intervention to change societal attitudes toward women. However, the recent anti-feminist trend in South Korea, which has gone to the extreme of demonizing feminism as an “anti-men” movement ([Cariappa 2020](#)), poses an additional barrier to women speaking up about discrimination issues and promoting legislative change to better protect their welfare, including safety from sexual crimes. China faces similar challenges, as its authoritarian governance structure is still highly patriarchal and emphasizes masculinity in social and professional settings. Interestingly, North Korea presents a more progressive image. At a December 2018 roundtable on the Korean Peninsula with ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) representatives in Yangon, the head of the DPRK Institution for Peace and Disarmament led a delegation with three young researchers, two of whom were young women in their twenties.

In comparison, various Southeast Asian countries have embraced the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda to varying degrees within public and private institutions, some without being aware of the WPS or gender equality agenda. This phenomenon can be credited to local traditions in which women are recognized as strong and capable, sometimes even more so than men. Although the majority of

Southeast Asian indigenous cultures are paternal-dominant, a maternal lineage tradition still exists and is practiced in certain cultures, such as the Minangkabau in Indonesia and Malaysia, where the head of the family is a woman and family property and assets pass to the daughters. Additionally, in Singapore and Vietnam, women are often viewed as being as capable as men. My Vietnamese friends from the academic and diplomatic communities often commend their women colleagues' exceptional capabilities in research and administration and their policy-relevant skills that have secured them swift promotions, compared to men in the same age range.

Goettner-Abendroth (2018) has observed that such matriarchies as the Khasi in India and the Mosuo in China are gender-egalitarian and that their consensus-based societies demonstrate economic, social, political, and cultural features, which disprove the prejudice surrounding "rule by women." Eradicating prejudice and confronting misunderstandings about women's role and societal dynamics will improve the understanding of the discrimination faced by women IR scholars and practitioners from the Asia-Pacific region.

I would like to offer some suggestions for overcoming the challenges faced by women IR professionals, namely public commitment, media recognition, and empowerment that transcends all genders.

*Make public-policy commitments to enhance gender parity and the recognition of women in the defense and security sectors.* There should be more public dialogues and forums on the problems facing women in these sectors. Governments should take action to bring about further progress.

*Increase media appearances of women IR professionals in the media.* Doing so will neutralize the common prejudice that women cannot discuss "hard" security issues. However, instead of putting together a "womanel" as a response to a "manel," having gender-balanced representation would project a healthy image for which a society should strive. Inviting women experts to write op-eds is also an important step toward this direction. For instance, my impression is that more than 90 percent of policy commentaries in Korea are still made by men, which mirrors the country's men-women IR faculty ratio.

*Empowering women should not only be done by women for women but also by men for women.* The United Nations' "He for She" initiative is a good example. This initiative has already been implemented in universities, including the political-science program at the UKM, which will enhance awareness among students and young adults. I am personally grateful to my mentors in Malaysia, Australia, Korea, and Singapore, the majority of whom are men, who have helped me significantly with my career progression. Additionally, I have enjoyed significant support from fellow women IR researchers in the early and mid-career phase, similar to the "lean in" concept articulated by Sandberg (2013). I also concur with Windsor and Theis' (2021) recommendation for systemic initiatives developed through professional institutions and associations to increase "male allies and their capacity to effectively advocate for women colleagues and students" in the IR discipline. For example, my close mentor (a man) makes it a point to cite me and other young women IR scholars to highlight our contributions to the field, especially from indigenous Southeast Asian IR specialists' perspectives and theorizing efforts. A Japanese professor (also a man) recommended me for a high-level forum in Tokyo and Washington, DC, to highlight my expertise in North Korean studies. Similar efforts have been made by fellow researchers—men and women alike—in Korean studies and even Southeast Asian studies abroad in their respective sectors, namely the media, academia, and think-tank networks, to promote not only my work but also the work of other IR professionals from Southeast Asia and Malaysia.

A long road remains before the global gender gap is closed and women are empowered in any profession or, for that matter, any aspect of life. This short piece reflects some of my thinking and observations as a woman IR scholar in Malaysia and my counterparts' gendered experience in Northeast and Southeast Asia. Going

back to the “personal,” as stated by Watanabe in this forum, I hope that one day it will not be necessary to highlight the plight of women in our profession and that scholars will be recognized primarily for their academic contributions instead of being constrained by their gender identity.

## Now You See It: Positionality and Gender in IR

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ISA 2020’s theme of multiple identities and scholarship underscores the topics of inclusivity, diversity, and perspective in IR. In particular, the conference call asks what is now known about IR as a result of the increased visibility of women, the Global South, and LGBTQIA+ people in the ISA, in terms of both membership and scholarship. The seeming need to emphasize visibility demonstrates the institutional recognition of a history of marginalization within the discipline; yet, at the same time, it raises the question of the role of positionality in knowledge creation, not to mention what can be regarded as proper modes of expressing “visibility” and “knowledge.”

Indeed, positionality cannot be stressed enough in matters concerning the nexus of gender, knowledge, empowerment, and visibility, as no one-size-fits-all approach to gender disparities and discrimination in academia (and beyond) exists. This also applies to gender empowerment, as the associated objectives and meanings depend largely on varying norms across and within countries. For example, I remember quite distinctly a conversation with a close friend of mine who works in the IT industry in the Philippines. She recounted that while the ratio of men to women in her company’s tech departments was not 50–50, it was nevertheless largely representative of male and female enrolment ratios in IT degree programs in the country. Yet, a directive from their head office in a Western state pushed for a quota for women, which caused consternation in an IT department already known for its friendly, inclusive working environment. Rather than being lauded as a step in the right direction to uplift the status of women in IT, the policy was viewed as yet another Western generalization that failed to account for cultural differences. A colleague remarked, “Perhaps they ought to learn from the Philippines instead?” The basis of this rather tongue-in-cheek remark was that the directive was apparently issued based on the assumption that hiring women in IT was inherently sexist and that the IT industry had a relatively equal ratio of men to women. In other words, enough women were qualified but were simply not being hired. While this incident did not occur in an IR setting, something may be learned here about norms. In searching for avenues of empowerment in commonalities among young women scholars worldwide, modern forms of positionality in a nexus of race–sex–language–sexuality–location–classability cannot be excluded from policies and practices. If empowerment from one position means demanding aptness from gender policies imported from contexts greatly different from one’s own, empowerment from another position could mean decreasing the stigma against women applying for certain jobs. However, what lies beneath the differing notions and objectives of empowerment is the hope of lasting change.

What does this have to do with IR? Consider context. On the one hand, the Philippines ranked highly in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report for a considerable period. While it fell to sixteenth place in 2020 from eighth in 2018 (World Economic Forum 2020, 9), the country still ranks first in Asia. The country

has had two women presidents. Women and LGBTQIA+ people are being represented at various levels of governance, academia, and business. As Hoo notes in her contribution, Carolina Hernandez and the late Aileen Baviera (among others, such as Rosario Manalo and Miriam Coronel-Ferrer) are well-established academics and practitioners working in IR in the Philippines. On the other hand, a host of politicians in the Philippines have made reprehensible remarks about women, while largely conservative views toward gender roles persist among the youth (Cornelio 2011, 170), in addition to a number of archaic, discriminatory gender-specific laws in the Revised Penal Code. The country shares other problems common to developing countries, such as a lack of family planning options (World Health Organization 2018), the gendered division of migrant labor (Tadiar 2004, 57), the double burden of paid work and domestic labor, and violence against women. All these dimensions reflect some of the harsh realities that accompany the often laudable headway the Philippines has made in gender equality regionally and globally. Thus, Filipina academics may reach stellar heights in their career, but deal with limiting gender roles, traditional attitudes, and violence in the domestic sphere. Additionally, glaring income inequalities and a lack of opportunities for social mobility plague the country and make it difficult for women living in poverty to escape their situation, even if they are educated. The feminization of the Philippines' persistent labor outmigration, women Overseas Filipino Workers' various legal and social vulnerabilities, and the country's economic dependency on migrant labor remittances are symptoms that all is not well beneath the surface indicators of gender equality. Thus, adopting the perspective of creating networks of solidarity across the Asia-Pacific region necessitates not only critical interrogation of the role of the "West" in sustaining precarious socioeconomic and legal barriers accompanying practices such as the feminization of labor migration or the lack of diverse voices in academia, but also a form of self-reflection on the role of Asian-Pacific states themselves (or, better yet, *ourselves*), as popular destinations for labor outmigration and as sites of prominent universities, in reproducing transnational gender inequalities within the region.

In terms of IR, the focus here will first fall on what is both a theoretical and a practical issue. How are empowerment and visibility defined within the practice and teaching of IR? The role of women in IR has been critically explored by J. Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe, and many other scholars of a feminist IR that is becoming more inclusive of non-Western, non-heteronormative perspectives. Thus, the emergence of diversity within a feminist IR may rightly be seen as a positive sign of empowerment and visibility. At the same time, one cannot discount that certain hegemonies are operating within IR. Apart from the exclusion of gender and feminist IR from course syllabi, thematic and methodological hierarchies appear to exist, of which gender and gendering are symptomatic. To illustrate: several "area studies" personalities, mainly in cultural studies, history, and anthropology (among them a number of women), have certainly contributed to the current understanding of transnational and international flows of labor, mobility, and culture, yet they seem to be marginal in the larger scholarly networks within IR due to their own and others' perceptions (or perhaps, the nature of gatekeeping within the discipline) that it is "not their field." Historically, IR/IS emphasized hard security and maintaining peace and order—themselves gendered endeavors, considering that these domains have been cordoned off to women for most of modernity. This raises a question: If IR ought truly to go "beyond" this scope and welcome the disciplinal intersections that pick away at its largely masculine underpinnings, how would this impact the "bigger picture" of the commercialization of academia? In other words, how would it dispel the increasing pressure to dismiss the relevance of both the humanities and the social sciences (as well as qualitative and heuristic methods and theoretical studies) in favor of STEM (and quantitative methods, formal modeling, etc.), for instance, through funding cuts and downsizing? It is precisely in the rigid technical-bureaucratic jargon of politics, finance, and university administration that decisions

with potentially devastating ripple effects for inclusivity are articulated. I remember how a former representative of the *Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst* (German Academic Exchange Service) in Manila once remarked how refreshing it was to see so many women who were tenured associate professors and above at a public university. Then she quickly added, “It was then that I learned about the low pay!”

Another issue is the notion of empowerment within academia. Does the presumption of a dearth of women or a lack of opportunities for women in IR simply mean that women are not being cited, or does it indicate the desire to encourage more women to enroll in IR classes or degree programs? Does it mean both of these? Why should the number of academic citations be the sole determinant of whether or not women are doing a “good job” at being visible in IR? An interesting critique by [de Joya \(2019\)](#) on the near obsession with neoliberal global rankings and citations draws attention to how this is intricately tied up with fluency in the English language and speaking to a “global” audience that may be very much detached from the grassroots, the people in one’s immediate vicinity, and the “masses.” Thus, the article raises important questions about what it means to be “visible” and “empowered” as a young woman IR scholar. Why is there a need to be visible in a manner dictated by neoliberal logics of symbolic power? Do practitioners feature in the common imagination of what “empowering young woman IR scholars” means? The distinction is important, as empowerment in IR does not or *cannot* merely come from the number of academic citations or publications, which are linked to networks of accumulated linguistic and cultural capital, as mentioned above. I bring this up because considerable power is involved in “who” gets to be heard and what kinds of stories become noteworthy. Broadly speaking, empowerment in IR may also mean being visible in various forms of cross-border practices (with reference to gender, those who work on the frontlines against sex trafficking and gender- and sexuality-based abuses, etc.), activism, and volunteerism. Indeed, what is to be done about international and local activists for political change, those who work in the field internationally, those who do the “grunt” work of negotiating global norms in a local setting . . . do these things simply not count as “visibility” in ivory-tower exchanges about IR? Are they somehow separate from what we do and what we care about? This type of reflection should also be made clear in our own teaching or practices. Reflective teaching and practice of IR requires an understanding that gender issues in academia do not occur in a vacuum and are inextricable from wider national, regional, and global phenomena. To be empowering, reflective teaching and practice of IR may very well have to include the capacity for empathy.

Several personal actions can be taken for the empowerment and employment of young people from this region—whether men or women—in IR. One of these is participation in transnational academic networks and events (in addition to grassroots and practitioner networks), not simply because this provides opportunities to meet scholars and practitioners with shared interests, but because participation in networks makes the fact of diversity, at least in terms of multiple perspectives and differing contexts, immediately palpable. Many have taken advantage of the fact that membership of professional organizations and research cohorts can facilitate collaborative research, which tends to create a sense of “place” through panels and roundtables across localities. These often broaden one’s horizons while promoting collective action and potentially transformational research agendas in transnational “pockets.” On a personal note, I have found that technology can help to facilitate the participation of young academics in collaborative research and fieldwork in the Global South, especially due to various financial constraints. Due to my work with PHISO, I often have to deal with coordination issues resulting from the impracticality of frequent face-to-face meetings due to trouble with funding and the archipelagic geography of the Philippines. These challenges have been mostly overcome by the use of various forms of apps, social media, online money transfers, and conferencing that have facilitated communication, despite the digital divide,

between members, professional contacts, and practitioners with familial responsibilities or who reside outside of Metro Manila. Contemplating the ramifications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the migration to digital learning platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic for inclusivity, access, and empowerment is a vital endeavor, which is inextricable from the Sustainable Development Goals and benchmarks.

Technology has further enhanced access to forms of peer mentoring among young academics, which is very important. Empowering young scholars of any gender will involve creating spaces where ideas are nurtured and constructively critiqued. Perhaps this may involve a restructuring of how academic papers and reviews are done, adopting a more dialogic and personable form of communication with regard to peer review.

I would like to end these reflections on a somewhat positive note, coupled with a few critical observations. In 2016, PHISO was formally established as a professional organization for IS in the Philippines, and it was comprised of many early-career scholars. Through our engagements, we were able to establish several networks, including a close working relationship with Miriam College, a Catholic women's university with one of the country's first IS degree programs and strong research programs on gender, environment, and peacebuilding. We have also reached out to various scholars from other disciplines who can contribute to our understanding of international and Philippine diplomatic and historical relations in the immediate region and beyond. Slowly, we are seeing results, with close collaborators affiliated with the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of the Philippines and the Decolonial Studies program at the Centre for Integrative and Development Studies. With these linkages, we are undertaking research on local knowledge on gender in an attempt to transcend the binaries imposed by colonial and modern logics onto forms of being, in which Western norms informed particular attitudes, behaviors, practices, and laws that still continue to influence the framing of gender. This includes the role of women in knowledge creation. There is a great deal to discuss and put into practice in terms of the idea of "empowering" young women academics, which intersects with institutional and national contexts as well as multiple overlapping identities. I hope forums such as this will mark the beginning of inter- and intra-regional conversations that aim not just to critique and reflect on gendered norms, practices, and notions of empowerment, but also to transform them. Empowerment in any broad sense also means being able to empower others.

## **Concluding Reflections: Other/More than Empowerment and Inclusion?**

SHINE CHOI

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Our conversation in Singapore invited an eclectic group of academics to an open roundtable discussion on navigating a career in IR as women, as minorities, and as outsiders. In many ways, this was an opportunity to collectively turn our careers and experiences into the subject of interrogation and conversation in a formal setting. In short, the panel was an opportunity to include our experiences as part of what we study, in other words, as part of global politics and questions of power. One might think the panel discussion, which centered on women's experiences in the discipline, was a feminist conversation. However, for me at that time, it was and was not. This ambiguity is something with which I struggled when we first drafted our forum. Seeing how the stories transformed from their initial articulation in Singapore to the first drafts and now their near-final form, I am reminded of how

our stories change and gain layered meanings the moment they are written down and shared and enter public spaces. I am reminded that trying to record our stories is important, and so much would have gotten lost if we just left the discussion in the conference roundtable form. For this, I thank Watanabe and Chen for their perseverance and hard work in spearheading the publication of this conversation. I had a hunch early on, but it is clear now that my academic feminist ear got in the way of hearing the stories on their own terms and appreciating our initial conversation for what it was: a call for solidarity. I am still not sure if this is possible, not because of anything particular about this gathering, but because I now know enough not to expect solidarity in a substantial sense in academic networks. All I think we can offer each other is support where possible, but by and large not much more than a human ear and friendship. While I write this in the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic and while I continue to witness what feels like a conveyor belt of wars and human suffering, a commitment to remaining a feeling, thinking, imperfect human always up for a good, honest chat feels as though it is enough.

Our conversation in Singapore was rare from my viewpoint as a feminist/postcolonial IR scholar. It was a discussion on the experiences of women and minorities in the field that was not structured by Western feminists as the dominant dialogue partner. Feminist IR thought and experiences were not the driving force in this discussion structured by “Asian” IR scholars for early-career researchers from, in, and working on Asia. In a way, this made sense. Feminism is not a popular field of study in the Asia-Pacific region, and the world of feminist IR is overwhelmingly Western. Whenever I am on a conference panel on East Asia or Korea, I am often the only person drawing on feminist scholarship, even if the sessions concern critical approaches and include a few women. As the stories in this collection testify, the absence of feminist perspectives or, for that matter, critical perspectives from women and scholars from minority backgrounds is the result of the “natural” distance IR as an academic field and career path maintains *vis-à-vis* those who do not buy into the male-centric premise of doing one’s work. Put more directly, this absence is a product of naturalized exclusion, hierarchy, and erasure wherein academic institutions and disciplinary norms function to solidify rather than disrupt society. However, part of this continuum of power that marginalizes women and feminist thought in the Asia-Pacific is the position of authority white feminism occupies globally within feminism and in mainstream contexts, where it is often the voice of authority that speaks on behalf of the marginalized.

This has numerous implications, and I am not sure whether I have managed to draw them out in this short essay. However, the most important point I would like to impress on readers is not so much a critique of white, Western hegemony or Eurocentrism, but that more stories like those in this collection should emerge, including those that contradict and complicate the stories in this collection. We need to listen to each other more. Furthermore, if feminist IR aspires to reach out and build the next generation of feminist IR in different regions beyond the North American–Western European experience, this “unusual” conversation is exactly what feminists—wherever they are—should welcome, listen to, and learn from.

What immediately struck me at the time of the conversation was the plurality of voices, experiences, and politics. We do not inhabit one single professional world; even the same spaces and moments are experienced in different registers. Mapping and unpacking the multiple realities that always coexist in full complexity requires an ethos of equality and dialogue in the deepest sense. A superficial language of inclusivity and empowerment does not allow for attending to this foundation-building aspect of coming together. I learned that the work here might need to start from the most basic conditions, rather than in debating ideas or the substance of the work in a sense. The more urgent issue involves making the burden of working in IR and university structures less violent, exploitative, and oppressive for “belated” entrants

to the field. Our politics and perspectives might differ and aligning them is not the goal; instead, the conversation taught me that we need ways to share the burden so all “new entrants”—although this idea, together with the term “early-career researchers,” is woefully inadequate—can focus on and derive pleasure from getting on with the work we each wanted to do in IR as a discipline and universities as a site of work in the first place. Furthermore, this emphasis on sharing the burden can be experienced as an individualized burden or risk, and we need more nuanced ways to respond to this experience other than chastising our peers and students as neoliberal subjects.

Turning to critical traditions of IR, including feminism, will not solve the problems illuminated in this collection of essays. Critical IR traditions, such as neo-Marxism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, and queer theory, all supposedly help us to hone our critique of power. However, these traditions all have their specific politics and failures in translating into professional everyday settings that could engender listening and conversations in support rather than critique. This is because the stories demand support and solidarity instead of critical insight or advice. Paradoxically, then, academic critical traditions seem irrelevant here because of their neglect of contexts and contextual knowledge practices, as well as the critical difficulties posed by personal stories. We scholars working in, on, or from Asia then have to ask, “What kinds of conversation in/via/for IR concerned with domination and the sharing of burdens do Asian contexts need?” As this collection attests, more plural narratives must first be created, and this happens through sharing personal experiences, which often jars one’s academic intellectual persona and practice. This is especially difficult in the context in which the prevailing modern Western form of sharing knowledge is one of evaluating, listening to ascertain whether one agrees or disagrees, and seeing if the speaker is right or less so. This particularly critical stance consolidates the base of dialogue, support, and friendship, while excluding those who stand in front of us, those making their way in IR and/or the world in all directions that many will never understand on their terms. Disciplining other regions in this sense has certainly been the general mode of operation not only in Western IR but also in global models of the modern university. In this context, what does an inclusive discipline or the empowerment of women and marginalized subjects mean? Most importantly, what can inclusion and/or empowerment mean at their limits?

The final question in the previous paragraph is important because it leads to a more practical level of being critical, which leads in turn to a fundamental distrust of the existing language, regimes of intelligibility, social and professional networks, and routes that connect regions and locations. However, only by trying out ideas, formats, and strategies and only by learning from mistakes can we find better languages of sharing burdens and building an IR community in Asia that does not hate difference, including minorities, women, the feminine, and feminism. In this context, I also want to acknowledge that this geographically situated conversation on women in IR would not have happened without the work of white feminists and Western-oriented feminists engaged in their own struggles in their own locations and realities legible to them. This is still the case, even if we ourselves do not work on feminist IR or are unfamiliar with the texts. It is important to register that whatever shifts and openings in the “one-eyed monster of Eurocentric IR” (Hobson in [Ling 2014](#)) we observe in our respective spaces come from the big and small miracles feminists have worked in their long fight to disrupt and dismantle. It is important to hear their stories of survival in a world that is inhospitable to certain constellations of ideas and ways of being, speaking, writing, thinking, and working toward liberation. Thus, while the conversation in this collection is not necessarily “about” or does not necessarily come from or align with feminist IR, we might still benefit from asking the question, “What can we learn from the struggles of feminists in IR?”

To conclude, what we are dealing with here is not inclusion or empowerment in any simple sense, but something more transformative, ambiguous, and un(der)written. At a glance, the first steps would look small, intimate, and more personal, along the lines of the discussions in Singapore: questions about career development and experiences in IR that operate within certain assumptions underpinning the larger social inequalities and structures of which academic IR forms part. This kind of unfairness has been considered acceptable, while individuals bear the burden of its violent unacceptability, which continues to be brushed under the carpet, and memory as individual problems and experiences to be overcome alone. My action points for those who agree with some of the ideas expressed here and what is at stake are as follows.

Let us invite to read, listen, and talk with each other across various divides in the IR discipline and see what happens in Asia, in inter-Asia, and in inter-regional spaces inside and outside the region. Let us do this by cultivating new ways of listening to each other and presenting our ideas and questions, with a more diverse readership in mind that does not always hark back to the established canons and turns in the discipline. Let us do this without concern for offence, breaking rank, being respectable, labeling or sizing up each other and, as far as possible, by trying in all our imperfect attempts to critically displace the problematic aspects of the societies from which we come that so easily get reproduced in how we do our work and move around the world as academics. Let us be curious about one another's experiences, locations, and ideas beyond what our "natural" inclinations might allow. Let us never forget that not only universities but also we ourselves are vessels of social norms that naturalize hierarchy, domination, and violence. All these things point to how knowledge production and sharing stories are more of a process than a practice in judgment.

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