

Into Our Feminist Thinking...

Women in Action (WIA) has been coming out as a thematic magazine (focusing on a single topic each issue) for a decade now.

For the last 10 years, we have covered a vast range of issues confronted by the Asia-Pacific women's movement. Some of these issues like violence against women, women's health and reproductive rights have persisted for ages, while some others are just emerging, such as the issue of women and the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) or women's mental health as distinct from physical or emotional health.

Some of these have been widely discussed and debated, while some hardly surface in discussions in the regional women's movement. One that has been hardly discussed in the Asia-Pacific women's movement is the issue of women with disabilities.

Given Isis International-Manila's mandate of linking the gender perspective with other social movements, we feel that disability rights in the context of the Asia-Pacific women's movement is a topic that needs to be highlighted.

The movement of people with disabilities has made studies in the region over the past decade, influencing both government and UN agendas both regionally and internationally. While there are a number of vocal women advocates within this movement, for the most parts, specific concerns of women with disabilities have not reached the fore of the women's movement in the region. In terms of access, participation, control and decision-making of women in different socio-political and economic arenas, it is still ethnicity, class, caste and religion that are factored into these analyses, activism and policy development.

We are delighted, therefore, to share with you the very rich harvest of writings from women (and one man) from different parts of the world, many of whom are advocates and supporters of people with disabilities, and some, who have disabilities themselves.

One interesting area of discussion that we would like you to note has to do with the common definition of the word disability raised by Chitra Radhakrishnan, in her article, "Body as Bane: Women and Disabilities in Indian Patriarchy." Radhakrishnan contends that other than the common definition which refers to the physiological, mental or psychological disorder, there is also the matter of social disability as manifested in the experiences of Indian women such as dark complexion, infertility and "inability" to give birth to male progeny.

Another is the experience of normalisation and sameness discussed by Susan Hawthorne. In her article "Disability and Diversity: Challenges to Normalisation and Sameness," Hawthorne argues that normalisation is a process that most people who live with people with disabilities hope that no one would notice, that no one would ever know about their loved ones' disabilities. This process of normalisation, according to her, has the effect of making everyone little models of sameness.

In the same article, Hawthorne expresses her appreciation of the usefulness of the new ICTs, but very honestly expresses her distrust of the rationale; amongst her worries is that the normalising forces behind the way in which ICT is promoted to people with disabilities.

Meanwhile, Inge Komardjaja, in her article, "The Internet Empowers Women
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with Disabilities," acknowledges the benefits of ICT in the campaign for the rights of people with disabilities. Contrary to Hawthorne's views, Komardjaja maintains that the Internet has a non-discriminating impact on people because it facilitates personal communication without the parties having to meet face to face and, therefore, their disabilities are not exposed. She also lauds the fact that these technologies allow for teleworking, which is a big boon for women with limited mobility. However, Komardjaja's enthusiasm about ICT is tempered by her own realisation that ICT at the moment is only available to the middle and upper class.

In the selection of articles, it was clear to us from the beginning that while we wanted to draw attention to the discrimination against women with disabilities, the abuses they experience, and the exclusion they are subjected to, we want to put a greater stress on identifying the strategies to overcome the disadvantages. Moreover, we want to highlight civil society's response to the issue and more importantly, share the experiences of women with disabilities who are asserting their self-determined lifestyles and in the process have learned to empower themselves.

As it had been in all other issues of WIA, we are proud to be able to share these vibrant voices and hope that they will resonate further in the women's and other movements for social transformation. We are also grateful for the opportunity that this issue has provided in expanding our networks. We share the hope of women with disabilities that this issue will soon be given greater attention in all aspects of feminist thinking.

