

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE:

Women, Power, and Change in Southeast Asia

A report by Margo Okazawa-Rey and Just Associates (JASS)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A vital part of this report about the current context in Southeast Asia involves showing the ways that ordinary people, activists, human rights defenders, and social movements are organizing to protect their communities from destruction and injustice, even in extremely precarious and dangerous situations. Some of the most vocal and active participants in progressive movements for change and transformation are women from the most affected communities in the region. Although separated by language, culture, and religion, as well as by oceans and physical distances, these activists have forged sturdy relationships. By working together across identities, issues, and organizations—from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand on the Asian continent, to the island nations of Indonesia and Philippines, and to Malaysia, spanning a southern peninsula on the continent and Sabah and Sarawakin on the island of Borneo—they are further strengthening their connections and capacity to lead change.

In recent years, increasing political volatility, repression, and a vicious scramble for natural resources in resource-rich Southeast Asia has had a devastating impact on families, communities, livelihoods, and the environment. In prioritizing large-scale extractive industries and neoliberal economic development, governments are putting the economic interests of transnational and national corporations and elites above of the rights and



security of citizens. In this context, activists and communities organizing against corruption and on issues of land, water, health, and violence are facing greater restrictions on freedom of expression, threats, and violent attacks by both state and private security forces.

Since 2006, JASS Southeast Asia has provided sustained leadership training and political accompaniment for grassroots women activists at the forefront of critical justice efforts in the region. Our work addresses women's central role in sustaining and organizing communities and supports their strategies and resilience to withstand backlash, including from within their families, communities,





and organizations for stepping out of traditional gender roles. Understanding context and power are central to JASS' approach to movement building. Our signature power analysis^{1*} framework has supported young, grassroots, LGBT, indigenous, and rural women organizers in Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Timor Leste, and the Philippines to connect the dots between the problems they and their communities face, and the political and power dynamics driving them. A shared understanding of the forces at play allows for smarter strategies, stronger alliances, and the prioritization and development of collective approaches to activists' safety in difficult and hostile contexts.

In the present moment, with the dynamics among political actors and interests shifting and intersecting in complex and intense ways, our allies and partners find themselves needing to regroup, retool, and rebuild. For this reason, JASS Southeast Asia commissioned a contextual mapping informed by a feminist power analysis. Drawing from, among other sources, a series of power and risk assessment workshops with women activists in the region from 2016-2017, the following report maps the challenges and risks affecting women, as well as the ways women are organizing to leverage the opportunities and "cracks" to mobilize for rights and justice.

The report serves three overall purposes. Firstly, it presents a **feminist analysis of historical and current political, economic, and social power relations** in the region. It demonstrates how these relations underpin inequality and poverty within and across nations and affect the most vulnerable: women in rural and urban areas; immigrant and migrant workers; refugees and displaced people; ethnic minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, intersex (LGBTI); and indigenous, landless, and poor people. Secondly, the report describes how the **dominant actors in and outside the region are consolidating their power, using violence and the threat of violence, to suppress dissent and advance their agendas**. Thirdly, the report details the **organized efforts to change these power relations and the conditions they create through grassroots women's activism and movement-building**. We offer this analysis to anyone concerned with women's rights and organizing in the region.



1. *For more on JASS power analysis: www.justassociates.org and our report Making Change Happen 3

While Southeast Asian countries differ historically, culturally, economically, and politically, the struggle for power, particularly the race to control resources – oil, copper, gold, tin, land, water, and forests – is playing out in similar ways. Across the region, we see the convergence of several dominant political and economic trends and global factors that are driving poverty, violence, exploitation, and inequity, and environmental destruction:

- A **rise in authoritarian rule and the suppression of rights and freedoms**: government leaders are consolidating their power and using state institutions and public discourse to shut down democratic space, polarize populations and silence activists.
- **Regional governments are working hand in glove with national and transnational corporations to extract natural resources**, either complicit or unconcerned with human rights abuses and the extreme exploitation of the earth and human labor involved, as they reap enormous wealth for themselves and other national and global elites.
- The **mobilization of military and armed forces to protect corporate interests, and silence the dissent** of communities, activists, and human rights and land defenders who are challenging policies, projects, and corruption.
- The **influence of nationalist and fundamentalist religious movements** over public opinion – and policy – is carried out in targeted criminalization, hate speech and violence, creating a climate of fear and risk for women and LGBTI activists, and human rights and land defenders.

All of these dynamics have roots in long histories of colonialism and imperialistic conquest in the region. The trends play out differently in each country, but the common thread is the interplay and collusion between state and private actors/interests at national and transnational levels, and their manipulation of prejudice and fear to divide and control.



In Myanmar, despite a transition from decades of military rule to democracy in 2010 and the hopeful 2012 election of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, the constitution safeguards the military's control and autonomy. These protections include impunity for the egregious crimes carried out by police and military forces against the country's minority ethnic and religious groups, most notably the violent expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslim people in Rakhine state, which the United Nations has called a genocide. Anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim violence is fueled by powerful Buddhist fundamentalists, who use their influence to provoke nationalist sentiment and generate fear of minorities. The state uses its legislative power and the justice system to silence and imprison government opposition or those defending minority rights, land, resources, and women's rights.

In Cambodia, the ruling party uses all means necessary to quell opposition, including enacting new laws and manipulating the justice system to harass, arbitrarily detain, and kill activists including women leaders on the frontlines of efforts to defend human rights and land. Although recently freed, land rights activists and women's rights defender, Tep Vanny, was imprisoned for over two years for helping defend the rights of the Boeung Kak Lake Community whose land was sold by the government to a senator from the ruling party to make way for residential and commercial buildings. It is perhaps not surprising that

President Hun Sen and business elites, many sitting in government positions, strongly resist forms of accountability or a change in government given how much they personally profit from corporate land grabs and resource exploitation.

Conservative Islamists in **Indonesia** wield considerable influence in government and over public opinion, mobilizing discrimination and violence against minority religious groups and LGBTI. President Jocko “Jokowi” Widodo, who came to power on a commitment to defend diversity and human rights, has remained silent and largely ineffective. The crackdown reinforces conservative interpretations of women’s roles in society, including what it means to be a “good Muslim woman,” that devalue and delegitimize women’s important contributions and leadership in community-led human rights and social justice efforts.

In 2017, Global Witness named **the Philippines** as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for land and environmental activists, and in 2018, authoritarian president Rodrigo Duterte placed 600 people on a government terrorist list designed to target human rights activists who oppose him. The list includes 70 women, many of them indigenous, from resource-rich areas like Mindanao, who are playing pivotal roles in the defense of ancestral lands from the destructive impacts of extractive projects. Duterte’s targeting taps into existing prejudices about indigenous people (“backward,” “communist”) and misogyny (“shoot women rebels in their vaginas”) in an attempt to isolate, terrorize and silence them. By declaring certain activists and activism a “security threat,” the government sows fear and polarizes the population, while justifying its use of violence and martial law across the Mindanao region.

At the **regional level**, corporate interests and the role and presence of China are reinforced by free trade agreements like RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership,) which if passed, will allow companies to sue governments who restrict operations in their countries including over regulation intended to protect public services and the environment. As neoliberal policies continue to drive inequality and economic instability and contribute to unprecedented gaps between the rich and the poor,



women and marginalized communities stand the most to lose from this deal.

The sweeping impacts of authoritarianism and violence, and the resulting anger and suffering, are generating resistance and organizing – courageous, creative, and persistent. In Southeast Asia, those at the forefront of the defense of communities, water, and land are mobilizing to hold the line against powerful and corrupt political and economic interests. Among the emerging networks and movements, the particular leadership of women stands out, with young women’s networks showing great promise in their ability to work across issues and connect across generations and borders. Whether serving as visible leaders of critical land and resource movements, like Tep Vanny in Cambodia, or organizing below the radar to keep members safe and strategically supported, like the young women of FAMB Indonesia, women are building and leveraging their collective power to solve problems, protect communities and the environment, and challenge harmful political narratives. They do this in the face of tremendous risk, for both challenging powerful interests and stepping out of traditional gender roles. **But together women activists are finding resilience, solidarity, and a shared vision for the future through their movement organizing and networks.**

For the full report go to JASS’ website: www.justassociates.org