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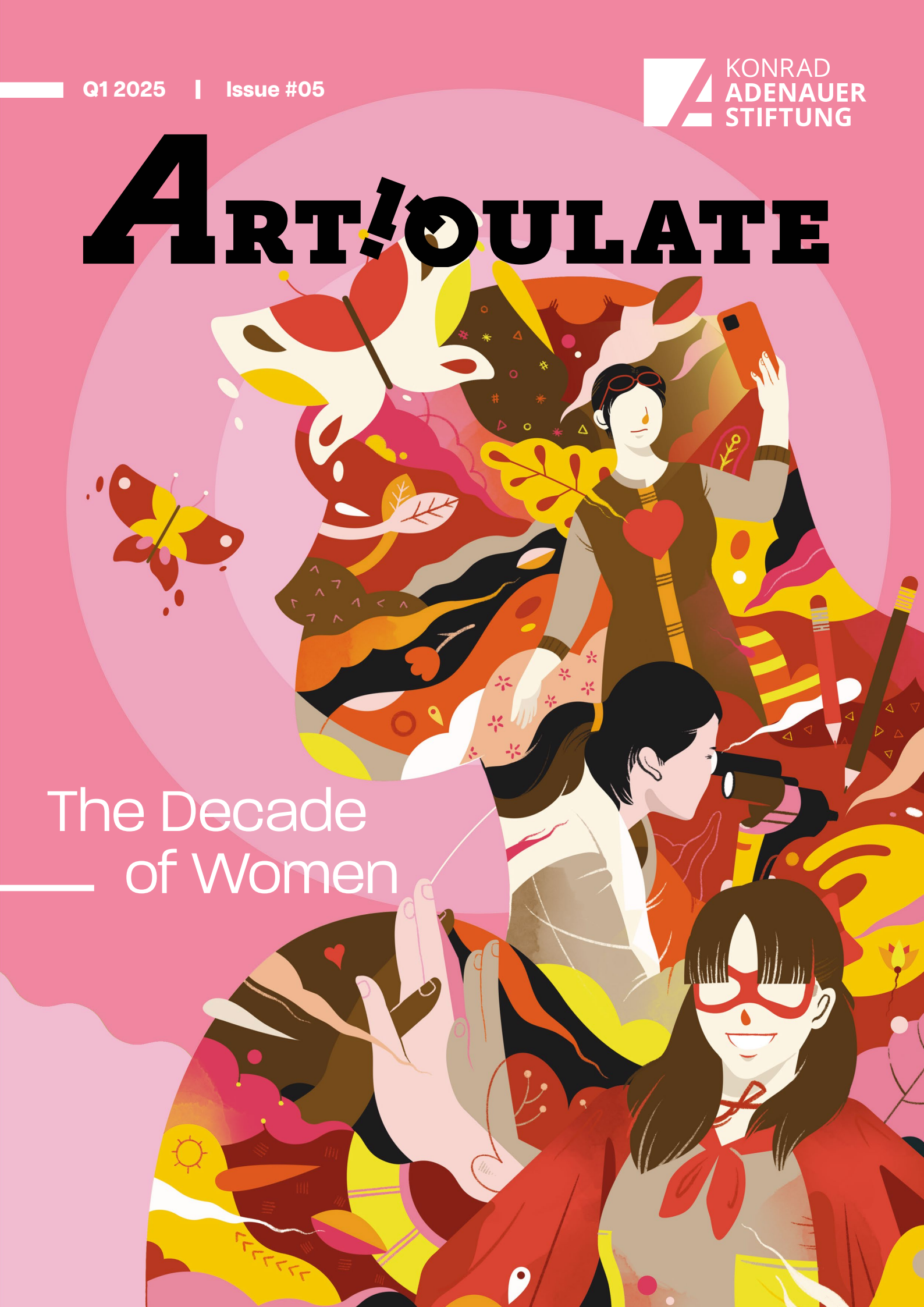
KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

ART!CULATE



The Decade of Women

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
MEDIA PROGRAMME **ASIA**

ArtIQulate is a publication for the Adenauer Fellowship, a scholarship programme by the Media Programme Asia, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd.

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ADENAUER FELLOWSHIP

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Konrad Adenauer, Turkey, 1954.
Photographed by Ara Güler.

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia

Named after Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia was established in 1996 to promote a free, responsible and ethical press in Asia. The KAS Media Programme Asia therefore connects leading journalists with one another, collaborating with colleagues and partners worldwide. The overarching goal of our work is to promote and support Asian media institutions and journalists in the development of professional journalistic standards in the region, to support young journalists as best as possible throughout their careers, and to advocate and promote the importance of media as an integral part of democratic and liberal societies.

The Adenauer Fellowship

The Adenauer Fellowship is a scholarship programme offered by the KAS Media Programme Asia to support journalism education in the region. The KAS Media Programme Asia partners with several educational institutions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. For more information about applications and application deadlines, please visit: https://adenauer.careers

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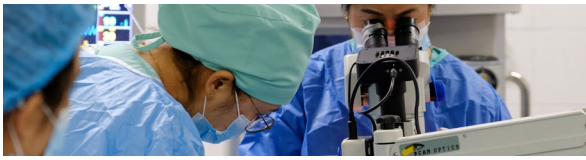


Foreword

This edition of *ArtIQulate* became a flip cover edition as we wanted to promote both, men and women, and their success stories under the topic The Decade of Women | The Decade of Men. The magazine is a celebration of gender diversity rather than setting the focus on the differences.

The cover illustration by Jaye Kang highlights three figures from the articles in The Decade of Women: Filipina wrestler Racine Anne 'Super P' Castro, a travelling ophthalmologist in Laos, and the Adenauer Fellowship alumni and journalist Jaqcue Manabat, while the cover page for The Decade of Men depicts Cambodian-American Hollywood Stuntman D.Y. Sao, cameraman Heuv Nhanh and our Adenauer Fellowship alumni and current PhD candidate Gopashis Biswas G.Son.

The section The Decade of Women of the magazine starts with a multimedia article by photojournalist Geela Garcia about early learning centres in the Philippines. It also features an article about new media in journalism including an interview with Jacque Manabat, written by Vanessa Buchmann during her internship with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Media Programme Asia in 2024, followed by an article written by Jacque Manabat herself.

The co-authors Anand Tumurtogoo and Khaliun Amarsaikhan, as well as Adrija Saha and Reynald Ramirez draw the focus to the lack of female representation in politics and health care. Ibrahim Khalil submitted two articles this time, one for each section of the magazine and illustrates his stories about women who lost their names; and the increasing oppression of men in Bangladesh through a very detailed, delicate and tactful writing style as well as observation skill.

The section closes with individual case studies by journalists from various countries such as Rosette Adel (Philippines), Sreypich Mao (Cambodia) and Prateebha Tuladhar (Nepal). This underlines a common thought about the Asian region, which applies for topics revolving around gender questions as well: unity in diversity.

Lisa Wlaschek

Project Manager
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd.
Media Programme Asia

#AMLA24: AI in Journalism

Navneeta Nandan

Adenauer Media Leaders Academy 2024 (AMLA)

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
15–18 October 2024

The continued convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and journalism took centre stage at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia's Adenauer Media Leaders Academy (AMLA) 2024 conference, sparking significant debate.

Set amidst the bustling city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 15 minutes away from the majestic Petronas Twin Towers, nearly 40 fellows came together at The Kuala Lumpur Journal Hotel on 15 October 2024.

The festivities kickstarted during the welcome dinner at Malai Thai with flavours and cuisines inspired from Thailand, including the fellows' favoured choice of khao niao mamuang, mango sticky rice. After an evening of food and fun, the participants called it a day.

Day 1

The first day of the conference began with an introductory address by Lisa Wlaschek, the project manager of KAS Media Programme Asia. She was followed by Ansgar Graw, the director of KAS Media Programme Asia, who formally opened the 2024 Adenauer Media Leaders Academy and encouraged everyone to 'celebrate AMLA 2024'. Finally, Miriam Fischer, the director of KAS Foundation Office Malaysia, welcomed everyone to the beautiful country.

The floor was now open for the first speaker. Shahzeb Ahmed Hashim, a lecturer at the Centre for Excellence in Journalism, IBA Pakistan, and the editor at Dawn.com began his presentation by playing a couple of songs produced by him via artificial intelligence in only thirty seconds. This aptly captured his topic of discussion: 'AI in Journalism: Trends, Ethics, and Applications'.

To begin with, Shahzeb highlighted the biases of AI—including gender bias—and misinformation. 'AI is so desperate to help you sometimes that it makes up things,' he said. But speaking in support of the technology, he said that AI is shaping up to be an equaliser, minimising the linguistic barriers.

Coming to the intersection of AI and journalism, he argued that 'AI is a great storyteller, so great that it blurs the line between fact and fiction. So, it can't be a journalist.' Speaking as an editor of Dawn.com, Shahzeb explained that he identifies AI-written content by checking for excess use of conjunctions like 'furthermore', 'moreover', etc. Interestingly, he noted that AI favours the word 'tapestry' and uses it in multiple different ways in its output.

With AI regularly coming under fire for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, among other things, Shahzeb suggested that AI be used to repurpose content, such as converting articles into video scripts, but opined that the technology should not be used for research purposes.

A practical training session complemented Shahzeb's presentation, where fellows split into groups of five to six to identify and discuss three problems that AI can resolve. These solutions focussed on AI's capabilities in process automation, pattern recognition, and prediction. After a thorough brainstorming session, the first of the groups presented their case studies and stimulated fruitful debate among the audience.

Each group also actively engaged with multiple AI tools like Chat-GPT, Perplexity, and Dall-E to assess their viability as tools to be used in journalistic work, including research, identifying experts, framing interview questions, writing the final article, and generating images for videos. At the end of this exercise, fellows shared ethical and feasibility scorecards for each of the tasks performed.

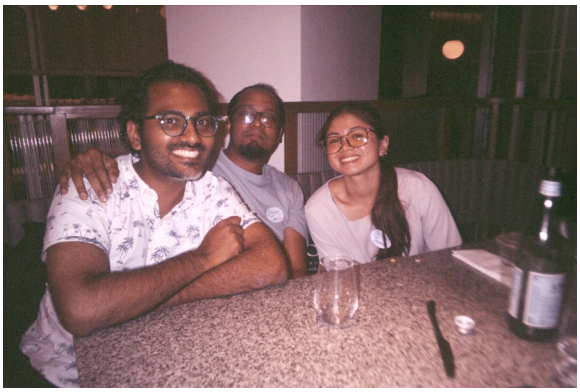
The day was wrapped up with a fascinating dinner at Kenny Hills Bistro, followed by a group photograph to commemorate the first day of activities.


So, what's the big deal?


THE KUALA LUMPUR
JOURNAL


Cases
ng your


Images have the power to tap into our emotions and perceptions in ways that words often cannot.



Photographs by:

Alec Corpuz
Lisa Marie David
Pau Villanueva
Piyas Biswas
Ron Ron Lopez
Sukanta Kumar
Ziaul Haque Oisharjsh
Lisa Wlaschek

Day 2

The second day began with buzzing minds, clicking keyboards, and energetic fellows as the remaining groups presented their findings to Shahzeb.

Wrapping up his session, Shahzeb left everybody with the message that in a world where AI exists, we cannot afford to ignore it. However, one must know where and how to actually use this technology.

After a short break, Alec Corpuz, the coordinator of Diploma of Visual Journalism at ACFJ and the photo editor at ABS-CBN News, led the second workshop. The topic of discussion was 'Visual Literacy and Generative AI in Today's Media'.

With a rich experience in visual journalism, Alec shared some basic know-hows with the audience. Showcasing a collection of photographs shot by him in the recent past, he emphasised that context is just as important as accuracy in visual journalism. He added that the burden of fact-checking falls to the visual journalist, not the audience. He also examined the western gaze and the male gaze in visual journalism. His session was jam-packed with numerous photographs and even more discussions and interactions.

An outdoor team building activity was next on the schedule. Fellows were divided in four groups, headed by Alec Corpuz, Ara Luna, Hashim Ahmad Hakeem, and Jacque Manabat and set off with individual group tasks.

Alec's team went on a photojournalism assignment at the Petronas Twin Towers.

Ara's team interviewed members of the public on camera.

Hashim's team was further divided into pairs to make paper planes without communicating verbally.

Jacque's team had to find five objects based on AI-generated riddles and an AI-generated image.

All group activities ended at the Petronas Twin Towers, which was followed by a visit to the top of the tower for the breathtaking view.

The second day of conference wrapped up with another lip-smacking feast, this time at Nipah Restaurant, where Ansgar broke the sad news of his departure from KAS next year after four years with the company.

With tonnes of memories, lessons, photographs, and great friendships, the fellows departed with a heavy heart the next morning. Bidding goodbye to one another with promises to meet soon, some went on to explore Malaysia, while others returned to their countries. ■

A Learning Centre Proves It Takes a Village to Raise a Child

Geela Garcia

AT WORK – Teacher Lita with students of Batibot Early Learning Centre. Photograph by Geela Garcia, 2023.

Batibot, an early-learning center beside the Marikina River, has survived decades of challenges, from typhoons to the global pandemic, through the collective contributions of the community.

This story was first published on Rappler.com on 5 November 2023.

This story is supported by the Dart Centre. Garcia is a 2023 Early Childhood Reporting Fellow of the Dart Centre.

Geela Garcia is a Filipino freelance photographer and multimedia journalist based in Manila, Philippines. Her photographic work, which documents stories of women, food sovereignty, and the environment, aims to write history from the experience of its makers.

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MANILA, Philippines – 'Karpintero, doktor, minero, nars.' ['Carpenter, doctor, miner, nurse.'] Around 10 children inside an unassuming 25-square-metre, three-story apartment building in Industrial Valley, Marikina City are singing enthusiastically, rehearsing for their moving-up ceremony.

The four-to-six-year-olds are enrolled in Batibot Early Learning Centre, a community-run early learning centre in a quiet residential neighborhood beside the Marikina River. Aya Santos, a mother who lives in Novaliches, Quezon City, sends her five-year-old son to the school despite the distance, as it is one of the few—if not only—progressive early learning centres within Metro Manila.

'I looked for a progressive early learning centre because I want my son to attend a school that values playful learning, rather than one that forces children to learn how to read or to write at a certain age, especially since my child will be studying for a long time,' said Santos.

A presidential decree in the Philippines requires each barangay or village to have at least one childcare centre. However, according to a 2011 country brief from the non-profit organisation Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, 34 years after the decree was passed, 4,570 of 42,026 barangays still did not have a childcare centre, and the reach of established institutions serviced only 20% of the entire population.[1]

The latest State-of-the-Art Review (SOTAR) of Day Care Services, published in 2010, stressed the need for more than one childcare centre per village to guarantee widespread access to services for all children.[2]

AT PLAY – Children playing in Batibot Early Learning Centre. Photograph by Geela Garcia, 2023.

State of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in the Philippines

In the Philippines, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) policies are led by three national government agencies: the Department of Health oversees family health and nutrition programmes, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) implements the 4Ps or Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program and supplementary feeding programme, and the Department of Education (DepEd) prepares the curriculum. The implementation of these programmes depends on each local government unit (LGU), and the outreach depends on the LGU's budget allocation and priority for ECCD.

Dr Excelsa Tongson, associate professor of the Department of Family Life and Child Development at the University of the Philippines Diliman, said that there are differences in priorities of each LGU, and there are several sources of funding to implement the programmes as specified by law. However, due to the lack of data, it is difficult to conclude the current state of ECCD programmes in the Philippines.

'We need to have another SOTAR because there is a disconnect and discordance in implementation. The ECCD council is a national government agency that has this mandate, but the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) is not part of its governing board, while the full implementation of the ECCD programmes and services rests on the shoulders of the local chief executive,' explained Tongson.

Additionally, the 2010 SOTAR did not include data on privately-run centres like Batibot. In 2020, during the pandemic, several daycare centres went out of business, according to Libertad Dipon, executive director of Batibot. There are nine public and private centres in Industrial Valley, with two private and one public centre forced to close down. Batibot is one of the few that have survived.

MOVING UP – Teacher Lita guides a student for the moving-up ceremony. Photograph by Geela Garcia, 2023.

'A school maintained by the community'

Batibot Early Learning Centre, a public-private childcare centre, was named after a children's show in the 1980s that was shot in the town. The almost four-decade-old school was the first daycare centre in the barangay, and started as a single-floor facility for children of tobacco factory workers and vendors living in Marikina in 1985.

Dipon, also known as Teacher Libby, said that the school was able to survive decades of challenges, from several typhoons to the pandemic, through the collective contributions of the community.

In 2009, when Typhoon Ondoy inundated Marikina, Batibot had to close down for two months. The whole first floor was submerged in mud, school materials which mostly came from donations had been lost, and members of the community cried over the damage done to the school.

'Mothers offered to clear the mud, while workers donated materials and their time to help rebuild the school. A parent who was an architect offered to redesign the school, drawing plans for it to reach up to three floors since the school is located in a flood-prone area. It took years to slowly rebuild the school, and it was only in 2021 that the third floor was officially finished,' Dipon said.

'This school is built and maintained by the community. There was even a time when parents staged a play and used the donations to support the school. Everyone helped in the best way they could because the community realised how valuable having a childcare centre is,' she added.

LGU-run child development centres in the country are required to use a Learning Resource Package from DepEd. Since Batibot is privately run, it has more freedom to design its curriculum to cater to the needs of its enrollees and families. The school has a learning registered number (LRN) provided by the DepEd, allowing toddlers who move up to enroll in preschool or Grade 1 in public or private schools.

Malundras said that their curriculum is updated every school year. For 2023, the school decided

> "This school is built and maintained by the community. There was even a time when parents staged a play and used the donations to support the school. Everyone helped in the best way they could because the community realised how valuable having a childcare centre is."

LIBERTAD DIPON

Executive director of Batibot

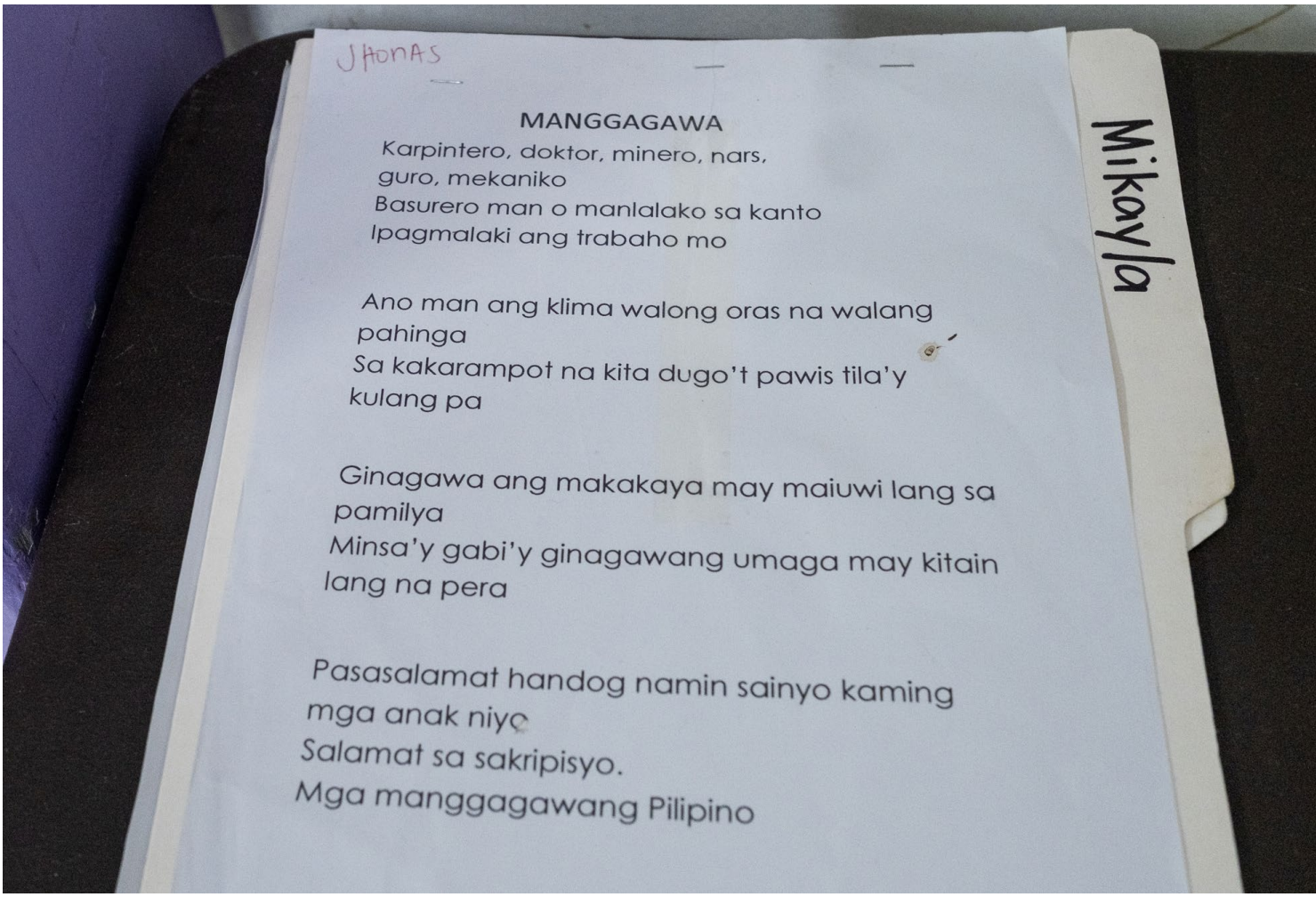
to focus on the ins and outs of the working world, because most of the children enrolled in the school had parents who worked in factories, were overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), or professionals.

'Most of the parents were laid off from work due to the pandemic, so we focussed the curriculum on the needs of their parents and teaching kids how issues in society affect families,' Malundras said.

Before every school year begins, the school assesses all the enrollees' capability levels and designs a curriculum based on the skills of the children. The lessons begin with the kids getting to know themselves through their bodies, understanding their role in the family, and their responsibility in the community and society.

'There are ways to tackle big societal roles and problems with children at an early age. It's little things, like making them understand how their mother carried them for nine months, and how difficult bearing a child could be, but in children's terms,' explained Malundras.

A copy of the presentation that the kids were rehearsing in school. Photograph by Geela Garcia, 2023.



Extended homes and communities

While it's the children who are enrolled, parents are also invited to seminars to teach them progressive discipline, and some are also taught alternative livelihood workshops. But beyond the curriculum, the school becomes an extension of home and community for several parents.

Santos is an NGO worker who often travels for work, and she leaves her son, Kion, in Batibot for the week. Renalyn Cabututan, another parent who lives a few blocks away, sometimes takes Kion in for several nights at her home. For Cabututan, there is no problem in caring for Kion during the week because he also gives Zion, her son, company.

'What I like the most about the school is that it's a community school, and my fellow parents know that it takes a village to raise a child. People are willing to take care of each other's kids, and the kids can socialise more and forge bonds with their classmates,' said Santos.

Core values of simplicity are also taught to the children and parents in the form of meals. Parents are on a rotation on school days and are given a grocery budget to cook meals for the students during meal time, while some are tasked with washing the dishes.

'We do this so that kids can avoid comparing each other's meals, as well as to ensure that their meals are healthy,' explained Malundras.

While the community-run facility stands out for its curriculum and environment, its teachers, however, are not spared from the plight of ECCD state workers in the Philippines. In Batibot, teachers' salaries—referred to as allowances—range from PHP7,000–9,000 monthly and come from the small tuition fee paid by parents.

'I also work in the barangay for extra income. For teachers, the income is deficit, but we survive because we are single and live a simple life in Batibot,' said Dipon.

PLAY TIME – Teachers Lita and Lourdes play with students in the makeshift playground where the children can release their energy. Photograph by Geela Garcia, 2023.

> Childcare workers have a very big role in our society, which is why it is necessary to fight for their rights. A child's brain continues to develop until the age of nine, and we need to give these carers what they need so that they can also be in a comprehensive capacity to take care of the next generation.

ARLENE BROSAS

Gabriela Women's Party Representative

The average salary of childcare workers, regardless of whether state- or privately-owned, ranges from PHP13,000–P18,000 per month. Tongson said that a PHP18,000 monthly salary is already considered high for childcare workers. Most of these workers also don't enjoy the same benefits as regular workers in other industries. Teacher aides, or volunteer teachers who assist in state-run centres, can even be paid as low as PHP500 per month.

Magna Carta for childcare workers

For Gabriela Women's Party Representative Arlene Brosas, Batibot itself mirrors the state's lack of priority given to ECCD.

'Batibot helps the small community of Industrial Valley and it continues to exist because of the goodness of the parents' hearts to support these services. However, this also shows that the private sector is [filling in] the gaps of the state, because the current daycare centres that we have can't fulfill the needs of all families,' said Brosas.

Brosas explained that the state can show support for ECCD programmes by passing the bill for the Magna Carta for Child Development Workers (House Bill 3266), which seeks to provide the security of tenure for daycare workers or child development workers. This is also to standardise a salary for over 67,000 childcare workers, both tenured and non-tenured.

Unfortunately, there have been no developments in the passing of House Bill 3266; at the time of this article, it remains at the Philippine House Committee on the Welfare of Children. Nevertheless, the party-list has submitted amendments to include both financing for workers under the DSWD budget, and the right of daycare workers to self-organisation.

'Childcare workers have a very big role in our society, which is why it is necessary to fight for their rights. A child's brain continues to develop until the age of nine, and we need to give these carers what they need so that they can also be in a comprehensive capacity to take care of the next generation,' stressed Brosas.

Meanwhile, in Batibot, as it starts to drizzle in the daylight, the kids utter the last lines of a poem: 'Salamat sa sakripisyo, mga manggagawang Pilipino', ['Thank you for the sacrifices, Filipino workers']. The day feels quiet and slow as teachers and guardians—some of the parents who have just gotten out of work—continue to hope for better working conditions. ■

Reference

1. 'The Philippines Country Brief'. *Early Childhood Workforce Initiative*, March 2019. https://www.r4d.org/wp-content/uploads/Brief-Philippines.pdf.
2. Early Childhood Care and Development Council (Philippines), *State-of-the-art Review of Day Care Service in the Philippines: Provincial and city profiles on the implementation of day care service in the Philippines* (Philippines: Early Childhood Care and Development Council, 2010).

Behind the Screen:

How Multi-Platform Journalist Jacque Manabat Reaches a New Audience

Jacque Manabat is an independent creator on TikTok. In an interview with Vanessa Buchmann, she discusses the initial resistance she faced, and why her courage ultimately paid off. The Filipina provides insights into what makes TikTok unique as a platform, shares what she has learned about the younger generation, and demonstrates how journalists can thrive there.

Vanessa Gloria Buchmann

Translated with support of AI.

Short videos, viral dancing trends, an app hailing from China—*these are perhaps a few key phrases that immediately come to mind when thinking about the social media platform TikTok.*

TikTok has a notorious reputation as a platform full of nonsense that targets the younger generation, whose attention span is increasingly stunted by the endless feed of short-length videos. Many of these stereotypes may be partially true, however, critics also have to acknowledge that the platform is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Since its launch in 2016, the app has rapidly evolved into the fourth most popular social media platform worldwide, boasting over one billion monthly users as of May 2024. According to statistics, approximately 90% of these users engage with the app on a daily basis, spending an average of 52 minutes on it.1 These numbers clearly indicate the extent to which TikTok influences the lives of many, a phenomenon not to be underestimated.

Not just a social network

TikTok is much more than just a social network. Increasingly, it serves as a search engine, connecting its users with trends, music, and news—the latter in a significant way. Various studies indicate that TikTok has now become the primary news source for Gen Z, with this trend on the rise.2 Thus, the platform also offers an opportunity for journalists to reach an audience less engaged with traditional news mediums such as print, broadcast, and online journalism.

Jacque Manabat recognised this opportunity and became the first Southeast Asian journalist to implement TikTok as a news platform. The former TV reporter and Adenauer Fellowship Program alumna began experimenting with the platform during the pandemic, drawing inspiration from numerous successful influencers on TikTok. The experiment succeeded: today, Jacque Manabat is an independent creator on TikTok. In an interview with Vanessa Buchmann, she discusses the initial resistance she faced, and why her courage ultimately paid off. The Filipina provides insights into what makes TikTok unique as a platform, shares what she has learned about the younger generation, and demonstrates how journalists can thrive there.

ArtIQulate: I'm curious about how the idea to start posting on TikTok first came to your mind. Was it something you had been considering for a long time or was it sparked by a specific incident?

Jacque Manabat: I previously worked for the largest traditional broadcasting network in the Philippines, which has always been at the forefront of innovation. However, during the pandemic, our network's franchise faced financial threats , putting both my career and job security at risk. On a personal level, I was grappling with separation anxiety and loneliness due to the isolation imposed by the pandemic.

Like many others, I turned to social media to cope with the situation. It was there that I noticed people connecting through TikTok. This observation inspired me: if I could blend the traditional approach of news broadcasting with the engaging entertainment style of TikTok, perhaps I could preserve my career and continue my role as a journalist with ABS-CBN.

Embarking on this path was a real gamble. I experimented not only with TikTok but also with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—and to my surprise, it was successful. Reporting the news on TikTok seemed appropriate, especially given the rampant misinformation and disinformation on the platform. Despite the initial resistance I faced, even from the media industry as nobody had done this before, it was a risk that ultimately paid off.

How did your employer react when you mentioned that you wanted to start using TikTok? Were they sceptical, or did they see potential in your idea?

I believe my colleagues had grown accustomed to my tendency to experiment with new ideas (laughs). However, I did face resistance from my peers, and there was also criticism from both outside our network and the wider industry. I encountered dismissive remarks such as, "Oh, she's losing it. It's so cringe," "That is not journalism." In response, I reasoned that if the younger generation is tuning into influencers on TikTok, why shouldn't we make use of that trend? We need to gain the trust of a young audience, especially those who have become weary of the constant barrage of news about the pandemic and politics. There was a news fatigue. Therefore, I chose to disregard the criticism and take the risk, embracing the attitude of, "Yes, I'm willing to try this."

That's incredible! Now that you're highly successful, with over 300,000 followers—the most followed journalist on TikTok in Southeast Asia—do those who were skeptical now admit they underestimated the platform, and perhaps you as well?

> "By taking the risk and adopting a new medium, I've avoided becoming stagnant within the confines of traditional journalism. This shift has allowed me to engage with an audience that might have felt alienated by the conventional media."

Having established myself as one of TikTok's most-followed journalists and the first verified journalist on the platform in Southeast Asia, I believe my value is now evident. Those who doubted my approach are now embracing similar strategies. There's no need for apologies; I never sought any. For me, this path is about forging new opportunities for the next generation of journalists. The media landscape has been changing since then. Traditional media outlets are struggling, with stunted growth and financial challenges due to dwindling audiences. Many journalists still cling to the notion of being the ultimate authority, which has led to a disconnect with younger audiences who view influencers as more relatable voices. By taking the risk and adopting a new medium, I've avoided becoming stagnant within the confines of traditional journalism. This shift has allowed me to engage with an audience that might have felt alienated by the conventional media. It serves as a reminder that as the industry evolves, we must evolve along with it in order to stay relevant and impactful.

Thank you for sharing your experiences! Even now, some journalists still encounter pushback when turning to TikTok.

It is ironic that journalists in the Philippines, known as the social media capital of the world, shy away from TikTok, while the rest of its population is spending copious amounts of time on various platforms. Unlike other social media, TikTok is unique: the platform is rooted in sound and dance, having evolved from ByteDance's earlier venture, Vine. Its content is succinct and not typically focused on news. There seems to be a concern that storytelling might suffer, that the gravitas and authority journalists hold could be undermined in such a format. I understand why newsrooms were initially reluctant

> We expected them to come to us, but I chose to do the opposite: I went to where they were and reached out to them.

to embrace TikTok. However, as we witness a decline in audience engagement and trust, it appears that they are beginning to recognise its value—the value of being where the audience is, regardless of the platform.

There's almost no way to stay away from TikTok if you want to reach a younger audience. It's by far the most popular social media platform for Gen Z and people are spending lots of time on it. You've been on it yourself for a while now. What do you personally like about being a journalist on TikTok?

I appreciate that I was able to connect with a younger audience experiencing news fatigue during the pandemic. Upon reviewing demographic data, I found that over 60% of our eligible voters belong to Gen Z or Gen Alpha. These are the young people who frequent TikTok and are emerging as decision-makers. Engaging with them has been rewarding, because, initially, I assumed that this younger generation was simply disinterested in the news. However, after joining TikTok, I realised that this was not the case. It was us, the journalists, who had decided TikTok wasn't our platform, effectively choosing not to engage with the youth there. We expected them to come to us, but I chose to do the opposite: I went to where they were and reached out to them. This led to meaningful discourse. The level of conversation on TikTok is quite sophisticated.

How would you describe the discourse on TikTok?

There is a healthy and active discourse, and the younger generation takes an active interest in the news. I thoroughly enjoy reading their comments and engaging with their opinions. They communicate using their own vernacular—slang, memes—to express their points of view, but it remains a constructive exchange. We must acknowledge that while their methods may differ from ours, they are not inherently incorrect. I have stressed this point to newsrooms whenever I am invited to conduct seminars. It is crucial for us to speak the language of the future, the young generation, to ensure the survival of newsrooms.

Talking about engaging, what methods do you use to engage with your audience? Do you implement the feedback in your videos? And do you respond to the comments on TikTok?

My response to comments depends on their nature. If a comment presents an opportunity to delve deeper into the topic, I eagerly engage with it. However, if a comment is negative, merely critical for the sake of it, or if I receive threats of any kind, I choose to ignore or possibly block the individual. Such interactions are unhealthy and unproductive. These comments could also control the narrative and sway the readers' or viewers' opinions and make them believe false information.

There has been a debate concerning the act of blocking individuals on social platforms, with some arguing that it infringes on freedom of speech. My stance is that blocking is sometimes necessary to prevent certain individuals from dominating the conversation in a negative way. My goal is to cultivate a genuinely good community, not to chase the superficial appeal of follower counts, likes, and shares. I call them the vanity metrics. I prioritise building a solid community comprised of members who are genuinely interested in contributing to a healthy and constructive environment.

How do you select your content for TikTok?

If I were to compare my social media output with what I did at as a traditional on-camera reporter, I'd say that back then, it was all about the daily grind—news had to be breaking and quick, the typical fast-paced reporting. However, for TikTok, I create content in such a way that it could be evergreen, meaning that even if you watch it five or six months later, it will still be relevant. I focus on explaining complex news from today in an engaging and entertaining manner—a style I couldn't adopt on TV. When I reported live on TV, you would see me in full makeup, wearing a uniform, with my hair perfectly styled. On TikTok, I never wear anything formal. You see me as I am—more like a friend, a neighbour, or someone familiar. There's a stark difference in presentation. However, I believe what remains constant, whether I'm using TikTok or another platform, is the commitment to the verification process, adherence to ethical standards, and proper attribution of sources.

How much time does it take to prepare and film one TikTok video?

It varies. At times, after a cup of coffee, my creativity surges and I can complete the task in just 10 minutes—provided I have the clips, the story is clear in my mind, and I've already confirmed its accuracy.

That's part of the editing process. However, on other occasions, it could take me months to get it done. For example, I recently worked on a story about the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in the Philippines. I was invited to an event for this purpose. Editing that piece took me nearly a week, because I needed to verify the information and consult with sources again. There's quite a bit of process involved.

Sometimes people criticise broadcasting news TikTok, saying it only works with a catchy hook and sensationalised content. Do you agree with those concerns?

Well, using hooks is something we should be doing, but we must avoid sensationalising or scandalising the topic. The concept of a hook is similar to writing an engaging headline, and there's nothing inherently wrong with that. We craft catchy headlines and compose interesting opening lines to capture the audience's attention so that they continue watching or reading. Given the short attention spans prevalent today, if we fail to engage viewers from the very first line, how can we expect to convey the full message to them? Moreover, it's crucial for the audience to watch at least half or the entire video because the algorithm then promotes or suggests your relevant information to the user. It's all about the algorithm. If an important fact is inherently catchy, then why not feature it as the headline?

What does a journalist need to be successful on TikTok? Is it possible for every journalist?

We need to earn their trust. People are looking for authenticity. We need to show them we are human beings too, and not just robots that they watch delivering the news behind a desk or a byline. We also need to understand the audience as well as the platform they are currently using. Interacting with followers through comments, Duets, and Stitches can help build a community and increase our reach. Listening to the audience and responding to their interests is crucial. Given the short duration of TikTok videos, journalists need to master the art of conveying information succinctly without sacrificing the depth or accuracy of the story. Journalists should be ready to adapt to new trends and changes in the algorithm. They should also be willing to experiment with different types of content to see what resonates with their audience. While it is possible for every journalist to use TikTok, success on the platform may vary depending on the individual's ability to adapt to the medium, their content niche, and their engagement with the community. Some journalists may find that their content and style are better suited to other platforms, and that's okay. It's important for each journalist to find the social media platform that aligns with their strengths and audience.

And how do you gain that trust on TikTok?

Firstly, it's important to be relatable, authentic, real. People are seeking genuine connections. They tend to shy away from those who appear as though they're just trying to sell something, you know? The challenge for us journalists is figuring out how to overcome this barrier. How are we going to set aside our egos? As journalists, we have that ego because we possess a wealth of knowledge, right? We often view ourselves as authorities. I've been guilty of that myself; I admit it. But when you interact with the general public, it's clear they desire someone relatable, someone who can genuinely connect with them. They want someone who speaks to them like a friend or a sibling. Consider this: who would you trust more? Someone who is merely selling you something, or someone who engages with you as a friend would? I believe that's the current challenge for journalists. We need to get down from our high horses, strip away the façade, tear down those walls, and converse like everyday people. Society needs journalists because we are trained to verify information. We are the bastions of truth, the guardians of democracy. We have to be where the audience is.

You mentioned that it's important to talk to people in a more relatable way and make it maybe a little bit easier to understand the news. Do you think that this is something where the whole future of journalism is heading, not just on TikTok?

> They communicate using their own vernacular to express their points of view, but it remains a constructive exchange. We must acknowledge that while their methods may differ from ours, they are not inherently incorrect. (...) It is crucial for us to speak the language of the future, the young generation, to ensure the survival of newsrooms.


ByteDance

Multimedia journalist Jacque Manabat snaps a selfie outside the ByteDance office in Singapore. Photograph by Jacque Manabat, 2024.

If we go back to the basic communication theory, we have the sender, the message, and the receiver. Right now, there's a lot of senders and the message gets jumbled up. And the only messages that reaches the receiver are those that the receiver wants to accept, so that the agenda setting is already complicated. An effective communicator gets their message across until it reaches the receiver. Can we call ourselves communicators if no one is listening to us? So, what do we do as journalists if the information that we want to send to the receiver is important for them to know? We can't reach them because we've created that wall, that barrier. I think it is important for us to reach out to the audience this time and not the other way around. And again, we have to be where the audience is. We have to be where the battle is because the battle right now is against the plethora of disinformation and misinformation along the communication lines. I mean, at the end of the day, media organisations and newsrooms are businesses. How are we going to sustain them if we don't reach out to the audience who are the future consumers of news?

Totally. Do you think that there's also a possibility that journalistic content will become more visual rather than text-based in the future?

Well, at the moment, I believe that short-form content will continue to prevail. However, there will be a growing demand for detailed explanations in long-form content and audio formats. I think audio will play a significant role in the future, especially now that the pandemic has subsided and people are becoming busier. They are looking for content that they can consume passively through listening. For those who are still engaged with long-form narratives, such as text, it's beneficial to incorporate visuals and short-form audio to hold their attention. Essentially, we need to use short-form content to pique audience interest and draw them into the more in-depth, long-form stories.

You also spoke about misinformation and disinformation on social media. This is an ongoing debate about TikTok. Do you see that there is potential that TikTok as a platform can somehow purge itself of disinformation and misinformation? And how do you assess the overall risk of being on the platform as a journalist?

Social media platforms are tools for us. We use them to draw people back to the news and encourage them to keep themselves informed. Misinformation and disinformation are not exclusive to TikTok; they are prevalent on various platforms. In the Philippines, studies have shown that this type of false information is mostly found on Facebook. I have been developing a series called the Media Literacy Series that provides tips for navigating online content, disguised as a set of content creation hacks . In this series, I teach viewers how to fact-check information they encounter online and how to distinguish between real and fake news. I believe that we need more advocates for media literacy and online literacy. As journalists, our role is to engage on social media platforms where much of the misinformation battle is being fought. It's a challenging task, and I don't claim to have a single solution for it. However, taking the first step by being present on these platforms and disseminating news that has been fact-checked is crucial.

Still, there are significant security concerns surrounding TikTok, particularly the fear that its parent company, ByteDance, might have built backdoors into the app that could grant access to a smartphone with every download. This has led both the U.S. government and the EU Commission and Parliament to ban their employees from using TikTok on work devices. How do you view these security concerns and the government responses to them?

Security concerns surrounding TikTok are indeed a valid issue, but they are not unique to this platform. All social media platforms, regardless of their country of origin, have security vulnerabilities that could be exploited if not properly managed. Work phones are for work and not to be used for personal purposes. The critical issue here is not just about one app but the broader need for digital literacy and awareness among the public. We need to educate users on how to use these platforms securely and responsibly, understanding the risks involved and taking necessary precautions. Hence the need for

> "Society needs journalists because we are trained to verify information. We are the bastions of truth, the guardians of democracy. We have to be where the audience is."

online media literacy, which I am advocating. It's also essential to hold all social media companies accountable for transparency in how they handle user data and the security measures they implement. Governments and regulators play a key role in this oversight. As digital spaces become more integral to our daily lives, ensuring that these platforms are safe for everyone should be a priority, and that requires collective effort from tech companies, regulators, and users alike.

If the concerns about potential backdoors are valid and could be exploited by Chinese authorities, wouldn't journalists—especially prominent columnists and investigative reporters—be potential targets, just like politicians or senior officials? What risks do you see in this context for press freedom and the personal safety of journalists?

Journalists, especially those involved in investigative work or who hold significant influence, are potential targets. The idea that journalists may not be as high-profile as politicians does not diminish the importance of their data. Journalists often uncover sensitive information that could be of interest to various state or non-state sectors, and compromising their data could lead to serious consequences, including threats to press freedom and personal safety. The reality is that all social media platforms have security challenges, and the potential for exploitation exists across the board. This is why it's crucial for journalists to be vigilant about their digital security practices, why we must be proactive in adopting secure communication methods, using encrypted tools, and staying informed about the risks associated with the platforms we use. Education and awareness are key. Journalists should be trained on how to safeguard their data and understand the implications of using different platforms. Media organisations should provide the necessary guidelines and support to ensure their teams can navigate these digital landscapes securely.

Let's get back to your TikTok strategy. What would you advise journalists who want to get on TikTok but don't know where to start? Do you have to create a plan before uploading the first video?

I always advise them to identify their niche, their area of expertise. This is crucial because when you observe successful influencers, you'll notice that they each have a distinct niche, whether it's beauty advice, sports, K-pop, or something else. Once you've found your niche, become an expert in that field. If becoming an expert isn't feasible, then at least commit to thoroughly research the topic. By doing so, you'll create and cultivate a community around it.

After establishing a strong community, resist the temptation to obsess over gaining more and more followers. Instead, focus on consistently delivering content within your chosen niche. Play the long game. Do not be restricted by the vanity metrics. Whether your passion lies in beauty, politics, or any other field, stick to it. The key is to remain authentic—just be yourself. We are trained journalists and storytellers.

Is there a tool you would recommend using? For example, an app that people can use to start editing their videos?

Well, there are many editing apps available. The first suggestion isn't actually an app, but rather a strategic tip: you need to strategise your content. Planning your content is crucial. Secondly, if you're editing on a mobile device, CapCut is a great option because it integrates seamlessly with TikTok and is very user-friendly. I use Blur when I need to blur certain elements in a video, such as children's faces or brand logos. I believe these are the essential tools to start with. And it's definitely worthwhile to invest in a good microphone.

Many newsrooms try to develop new streams of revenue. Is it possible to make money with TikTok? And how do you do so?

If you operate a newsroom, there is a potential to generate revenue through TikTok. This can be achieved via affiliate marketing on the platform. You can also amplify your reach and potentially increase earnings by cross-posting TikTok content to other social media networks, such as Facebook or YouTube. Although TikTok may not be directly monetised in the Philippines, the platform has provided me with invaluable insights. From my experience with TikTok, I have learned the art of creative storytelling and how to engage with a younger audience. By cross-posting this content on other social media platforms, I have been able to capture the attention of a wider audience as well. TikTok has equipped me with the tools to understand the preferences of the younger generation, and I have leveraged this knowledge across various social media platforms, where such insights were previously lacking. These content pieces are instrumental in attracting a new audience. By engaging with the younger generation, we are connecting with future consumers.

What would be one top tip for journalists who don't know where to start with TikTok and don't know what types of content work?

As I said before, if you are a journalist trying to create an online persona, you should begin by identifying your niche. My specialty at the time was travel, transportation, and economics. I provided my audience

with travel tips, not just any tips, but also updates on transportation news. For instance, I informed them about new train routes that were launching, offering them timely and practical information. I also made it a point to demystify complex news stories. Or, if you represent an organisation, you need to delve into the essence of your business. What is your true focus? Is it politics or business? Whatever it is, commit to it. Once again, the key lies in finding your niche. You must discover your strengths and leverage them. That's really all there is to it.

Persisting security concerns

Still, the platform faces criticism due to security concerns. In particular, it's affiliation with the Chinese company ByteDance. There are fears that TikTok could potentially share sensitive user data with the Chinese government through ByteDance. Despite being considered trustworthy by app stores, what remains is a theoretical risk of malware unknowingly being downloaded via updates.[3] Furthermore, there is fear that China could exploit the platform to spread fake news.

General security concerns are equally applicable to journalists. In 2022, an investigative report by Forbes revealed that journalists' locations were tracked with the aim of identifying their sources. Specifically, the process involved determining the whereabouts of Forbes reporters who had previously reported on TikTok via the app (which they had downloaded on their phones), and comparing them with the locations of ByteDance employees suspected of leaking confidential information.[4] ByteDance confirmed the suspicions but announced extensive measures and the dismissal of the employees involved.[5]

In the United States, President Biden has initiated legislation to ban TikTok if the platform is not sold to another trusted company. The same applies to other platforms with over one million monthly users and have 20% or more shares owned by companies from China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea, which the President perceives as a "significant threat to national security".[6] Whether a ban is enforceable is not definitively clear, as legal experts argue that such action could conflict with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech. Regardless, TikTok remains fiercely popular, and is likely to stay a prominent part of the social media industry for the time being, despite the ongoing debates and potential legal challenges. ■

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How the Closure of a Community Paper Changed Sundays

The closure of a community paper in Baguio City, Philippines, is emblematic of a global shift. As the relentless march of digital media claims another print institution, profound questions arise about the future of print and community journalism.

Jacque Manabat

The author holding one of the final three editions of the Baguio Midland Courier. Reading the newspaper in coffee shops has been a staple activity within the community for decades. The absence of local community newspapers has left a significant void in sharing community stories that locals and tourists cherish. Photograph by Jacque Manabat, 2024.

BAGUIO CITY, Philippines – The crisp, pine-scented air of Baguio City carries a new quiet on Sundays, a silence that speaks volumes about the changing times in this mountain retreat. Once a bustling artery of local life, the Session Road, the weekly promenade for residents and visitors alike, feels different now. The sound of turning pages and the rustle of newsprint have faded. On July 22 2024, the *Baguio Midland Courier*, the city's sentinel in print for nearly eight decades through earthquakes, political upheavals—the pillar of the community that has witnessed the city's growth—printed its final issue.

The *Midland*, as it was affectionately called by the locals, was more than just a newspaper. It was a member of the community, a steadfast companion to morning coffees, and a chronicler of the city's heartbeat. From obituaries that spoke of lives well-lived to job openings that signalled new beginnings, from local scandals to celebrations, the *Midland* was there, documenting the ebb and flow of life 5,000 feet above sea level. Its pages held the history of the city, its triumphs and its trials, an irrefutably cherished part of Baguio's cultural narrative.

The announcement of its closure has left the city in a state of introspection, pondering the value of local journalism and the threads that weave the fabric of the Baguio social community. For Baguio City, the loss is deeply personal. The *Midland* is not just collateral damage of the technological revolution. It is a piece of the city's soul, a record of its past, and a casualty of a world speeding inexorably toward an intangible digital future. It was the city's living history, a testament to its past, a guide to its present, and a bridge to its future. Its closure has left a void in the hearts of the residents, a pronounced absence in their Sunday routines, and a poignant reminder of the changing times.

The end of an era

The decision to cease operations was not made in haste. Upper management at the newspaper grappled with a confluence of harsh realities: the financial vice squeezing the lifeblood of print journalism, a readership lured away by the siren calls of digital media, and the far-reaching impact of a pandemic that has left no sector unscathed.

The *Midland*'s farewell statement on its Facebook page reflects the gravity of its departure and the profound impact it will have on its readership and staff.

In the elegiac words, the *Midland* admitted reluctant defeat to the technological maelstrom that has claimed many a journalistic giant. The paper conceded, 'This is a difficult one,' its message steeped in the solemnity of the moment, expressing profound regret for the loss that will be felt by its readers, its streetwise newsboys, its staunch supporters, its vibrant contributors, and its loyal advertisers.

The journey began on 28 April 1947. The *Midland* was a beacon of news and community that grew from the vision of Sinai Hamada, a luminary whose roots ran as deep in the city as the native pine trees themselves. By 1963, readership had swelled, with 7,500 copies printed on a regular basis, stretching across the mountainous terrain of the Cordilleras. In 2007, marking its 60th year, the *Midland* embraced the digital age, launching a website to cast its words even further.

At the helm of this journalistic voyage was the late Dr Charles M. Hamada, known affectionately as Papa Charles, whose stewardship was guided by the lodestars of fairness, fearlessness, and friendship. Bree Hamada, his daughter, took to social media to paint a poignant portrait of her father's indelible influence on the paper and the community it served.

'The *Midland Courier* was deep-rooted,' Bree wrote. She conjured images of the bustling newsroom, a sanctuary of stories, and the dedicated souls who brought them to life. 'It was part and parcel of our Sunday tradition, as much a fixture as Mass itself,' she mused, her memories reaching into the farthest corners of the Cordillera.

In her social media post, Bree casts herself as a 'runner', not in pursuit of the latest edition, but as a courier of her father's editorial blessings. 'Papa was more than an editor; he was a maestro, intimately familiar with each writer's literary timbre, their unique lexicon, and their journalistic forte,' she reflected.

Under Dr Hamada's watchful eye, the *Midland* transcended mere dissemination of news; it became

a crucible of journalistic craft, a fulcrum of community, a hearth where the warmth of kinship mingled with the fire of inquiry. Bree recalls a newsroom that felt like home, where the staff reclined in chairs carefully chosen by her father and a printing press stood as a testament to his innovative spirit.

Dr Hamada's legacy extended beyond the printed page, touching the lives of journalists within and outside his fold, particularly when the spectre of legal peril loomed. 'Papa would jest about which prison tattoos would suit him,' Bree reminisced, her words etching the image of a man whose humour was matched only by his unwavering commitment to the sanctity of the written word.

Beyond the newsprint, Dr Hamada was a pillar of strength for his family and staff, fostering a sense of belonging that turned company excursions into familial feasts, where shared stories and laughter were as plentiful as the food. 'One might not grasp all the intricacies of sustaining a decades-old publication,' Bree said, 'but it's clear that it was the passion, the drive for journalistic excellence, and the close-knit *Midland* family that shaped its identity.'

As Bree's tribute resonated across social media, she acknowledged the shifting sands beneath the foundations of print journalism. Yet, she harbours a resilient hope for the *Midland*'s continued legacy, albeit in a new guise. She envisions the *Midland* enduring in the hearts and homes of Baguio, in new forms and forums, and perhaps, in the fullness of time, making a triumphant return.

'The *Midland* will persistently be present in Baguio homes, in other forms, ways, and hopefully a comeback. There are countless ways the Baguio community can help revive the paper—a vague wish,' Bree wrote.

This chapter of Baguio's history may have concluded. Still, the story of the *Midland*, its impact and spirit, remains indelible, inscribed in the collective memory of a city it served so well.

A vital part of the community

Ryan Dale Mangusan, former executive secretary to former Baguio City Mayor Mauricio G. Domogan and a civic organisation officer, reminisced about the role the *Midland* has had in his life and the lives of community members. From childhood memories of purchasing the paper to engaging with its journalists as a city hall staffer, Mangusan's connection to the publication is deeply personal.

'We will miss this weekly paper. Even if you hated it, you would still get your copy because it is essential on a Sunday. You would check the "True or False" and "Obituary" sections,' Mangusan posted on social media.

Despite occasionally criticising local administrations, including former Mayor Domogan, the *Baguio Midland Courier* has been a vital part of the community, holding leaders accountable and keeping citizens informed. Mangusan expresses his gratitude to the staff he has worked with over the years, including notable journalists.

Merani Cadap, a long-time reader, expressed profound gratitude to the entire *Baguio Midland Courier* team in a letter titled 'Reader's Corner'. Cadap praised the staff for their tireless dedication and exceptional work and acknowledged their significant impact in connecting the community and upholding the highest standards of journalism.

'Your work has not only chronicled the events of the day but also inspired countless individuals and future journalists, leaving an indelible mark on the fabric of our society,' Cadap wrote.

Trisha Joi D. Esperanza, a former child writer who made her mark through the pages of the paper, speaks highly of its profound impact on her upbringing and career. Esperanza, who won the UNICEF-Philippine Press Institute Outstanding Child Writer of the Year in 2006, attributes her love for writing to the experiences and opportunities provided by the local publication. In 2006, the *Midland*

> Upper management at the newspaper grappled with a confluence of harsh realities: the financial vice squeezing the lifeblood of print journalism, a readership lured away by the siren calls of digital media, and the far-reaching impact of a pandemic that has left no sector unscathed.

The impact of the pandemic did not spare local community papers. The vibrant city has witnessed drastic changes in lifestyle choices and news consumption habits, particularly among the youth and university communities. Photograph by Jacque Manabat, 2024.

hosted a writing contest that encouraged children to envision a child-friendly Baguio. Esperanza's winning entry was published in the *Midland*'s day issue and led to national recognition with the UNICEF-PPI Child Writer of the Year award.

'This award rings true: the *Midland* is, and always has been, a child-friendly newspaper. It wasn't just for grown-ups, and the memories of the *Midland* I see my friends sharing on Facebook are proof of that. The *Midland* formed a part of all our childhoods. It opened up avenues for children to just be children, and it was proud of its children. Through its competitions and invitations, it gave us a voice and allowed us to dream of more and strive for more,' Esperanza enthused.

Growing up in the vibrant city of Baguio, Esperanza's days were punctuated by the presence of the *Midland*. Whether it was a routine stop to buy siopao after school or a family tradition of reading the latest issue on Sunday afternoons, 'Santo maysa man auntie nga *Midland*' ['Auntie, one copy of *Midland*, please'] was heard throughout the city.

Continued closures

Over the last ten years, Baguio City has witnessed the closure of five local newspapers, among them an imprint of one of the nation's leading news conglomerates. *Sun Star Baguio*, a trusted news provider for Baguio and surrounding regions, ceased operations on 3 May 2022. Having been the sole

daily community newspaper in Northern Luzon for 26 years, its closure left 16 full-time employees without work.

Recent years in journalism have been particularly bleak, even when measured against the news industry's downward trajectory in the era of digital transformation. Major newspapers were forced to cut back their staff, a trend that continues to this day. Amidst the backdrop of an impending election in the Philippines, which is expected to be rife with misinformation campaigns, synthetic media propaganda, and critical discussions about the fate of democratic processes, the traditional news media—historically regarded as the guardian and promoter of social dialogue—is grappling with severe financial challenges.

As is the case in many other countries, the pain is mainly felt at a community level. According to a report by the Pew Research Center, newspaper circulation in America fell in 2018 to its lowest level since 1940, the first year such statistics began being recorded. While no specific numbers exist for the Philippines, the trend is palpable as major publications report decreased circulation figures and advertising revenue. The closure of the *Midland* is symptomatic of a broader crisis facing local journalism. Across the globe, small and regional newspapers need help to survive in an increasingly digital world.

The digital and social media revolution has become the go-to for news, events, and other forms of entertainment, delivering a significant hit to conventional print media outlets, from local papers to national dailies. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further solidified the importance of social media and digital platforms. News consumers gravitated towards these digital resources for a mix of confirmed and speculative information, attracted by their ease of use.

The loss of print publications has profound implications for national democracy and community cohesion. Local newspapers play a crucial role in informing citizens about issues that directly affect them, from local politics and education, to community events and small business advertisements, they foster a sense of community identity and cohesion that larger publications or digital platforms fail to observe.

Local newspapers also act as training grounds for emerging journalists, providing a platform for them to sharpen their skills and grasp the principles of responsible news reporting. These publications are the often-overlooked pillars of the media world, upholding the standards of journalistic practice amid an era of swift and sometimes bewildering transformations.

"Local newspapers play a crucial role in informing citizens about issues that directly affect them, (...) they foster a sense of community identity and cohesion that larger publications or digital platforms fail to observe.

Local newspapers also act as training grounds for emerging journalists, providing a platform for them to sharpen their skills and grasp the principles of responsible news reporting.

The challenge now is to carry the torch of responsible journalism into the digital age, ensuring that the essence of community news survives even as its platforms evolve."

Digital killed the print star

The rise of digital media is at the heart of this transformation. With the advent of smartphones and the internet, news consumption has overwhelmingly shifted online. A Digital 2020 report by *We Are Social* and *Hootsuite* revealed that Filipinos spend an average of nine hours and 45 minutes on the internet on a daily basis, one of the highest figures in the world, with a significant portion of that time devoted to social media.

This digital revolution has democratised information dissemination but also brought challenges, such as the proliferation of fake news, which undermine journalistic standards. The immediacy and accessibility of online platforms have changed how news is reported and consumed, making it difficult for traditional newspapers to compete.

The decline has continued for years, but the acceleration of this downfall in recent times is resultant from a painful confluence of challenges. News consumers suffer from news fatigue, inundated with major events like international conflict, the global pandemic, and the coming election and economic pains. This has driven those who follow the news to social media and anti-establishment sites outside legacy organisations.

Goodbye...for now

As we bid farewell to the *Midland*, we are reminded of the importance of supporting local journalism, print and digital. We must continue to value the role of journalists and newspapers in upholding democracy and political accountability. The challenge now is to carry the torch of responsible journalism into the digital age, ensuring that the essence of community news survives even as its platforms evolve.

Sundays in Baguio will indeed never be the same.

The *Midland*'s absence starkly reminds us of the fragility of tradition in the face of progress. Yet, even as the city mourns the loss of its paper, there is hope that the *Midland* spirit will endure, that new forms of storytelling will emerge to fill the void, and that Baguio's story will continue to be told for generations to come.

For now, the city bids farewell to a beloved institution, turning the page on a chapter that ends not with a period, but an ellipsis… ■

Jacque Manabat is an acclaimed Filipino journalist, celebrated for her innovative digital storytelling and audience engagement. A frontrunner in the Philippines' journalistic digital shift, she is dedicated to elevating narratives and forging connections. With 17 years at ABS-CBN under her belt, Manabat's expertise extends to media literacy advocacy and mentorship for aspiring journalists. Her academic credentials include a MA in journalism from Ateneo de Manila and a BA in mass communication from Saint Louis University, Baguio City. A lover of nature, art, and caffeine, Manabat enjoys painting florals, trekking, and savoring black coffee.

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Where Are the Women?

After recent elections, India is facing the dilemma of gender imbalance in Parliament.

Adrija Saha

Adrija Saha is an inspiring journalist who dreams of serving the world with empathy for the poor and passion for the truth, and holds a zest for learning new things. Trained in multimedia and broadcast journalism, she has been reporting from ground zero. She regularly works with one of India's leading English news channels. Having completed her degree in integrated journalism and with work experience in broadcast and multimedia platforms, Adrija is passionate about travelling and meeting new people to learn their cultures and tell their stories to the world.

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India, the world's largest democracy, has concluded their 18th general elections just a few weeks ago, but the number of women among the appointed legislators is far from satisfactory. A truly representative democracy requires equal representation of women in politics, which is clearly lacking in both the houses of the Parliament in India. Although the numbers show a continual development in this department over the years, the progression of this is far too slow, especially in a diverse country like India which claims to be growing faster than ever.

Elections in India are hardly more than a carnival—it is one of the lengthiest processes, conducted extensively across the country over a period of six weeks. The regularly circulated photograph of the election, showing women clutching their identity cards and lining up to vote in front of the casting centre has become a cliché. But behind the image is a story that has changed little over the years, just like the image itself. Unfortunately, it is Indian women, their issues and concerns that remain unlikely to change in the near future.

India is far behind several countries like South Africa, where 46% of elected MPs are women; the United Kingdom, where 35% of Parliament are women; and the US, where female legislators make up 29% of the government. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, India is ranked 143 among 185 countries—lower than countries like Pakistan and Vietnam, which have far smaller populations.

The slow rate of growth of female representation in the Indian Parliament is striking. In 1952, when India conducted their general elections for the very first time, 4.4% of the Parliament formed that year were women. But 17 elections later, as the 2024 elections conclude, the number has only risen to 13%. Out of the 542 seats in Lok Sabha (the lower house of Indian Parliament), only 74 representatives are women. In fact, the numbers have gone down by 1.36% from 2019. The situation is similar in Rajya Sabha (the upper house of Parliament), where only 24 out of 224 seats are occupied by women, accounting for a meagre 10%.

Even more striking, only 797 out of the 8,360 candidates who were contesting for the general election of the lower house in 2024 were women. There are several states and constituencies where not even a single candidate was a woman. Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that won a clear majority in 2019, had only 69 female candidates running in the election, out of which 32 were elected; 13 out of 41 female candidates were elected to Congress; and Trinamool Congress (TMC), a regional party from the state of West Bengal, has the highest success rate,

with 11 out of 12 female candidates elected. This accounts for 33% of TMC's total number of elected MPs, the highest among all the parties.

The modest number of women nominated by the parties reveals the true attitude of the political climate. While they occupy less than 10% of the candidate total, women account for 48% of the voting population in India. In spite of several surveys showing that today's women vote independently without the influence of friends and family, the question remains as to what is being done to bridge the gap to ensure active participation of women in politics. The answer is, too little. The gap is prominent and clearly indicates that very little has changed for women in the country.

Interestingly, a bill calling for 33% of parliamentary seats to be reserved for women in all legislative bodies was passed by the BJP government. However, this appears to be a political stunt made ahead of the elections. The promise of implementing the law after the delimitation process, post the 2024 elections, seems like a tempting but far-fetched ideal. The lack of commitment of the political parties to increase the representation of women in Parliament is evident for anyone looking at the numbers closely enough.

Nevertheless, the problem is not as simple as legally implementing female representation. Although the political parties are responsible for nominating female candidates, the lack of participation of women in politics reveals the complexity of the problem. Politics, especially in India, is dominated by men. Even women who become politically involved are from political families; they are well known as daughters, wives, or daughters-in-law of existing male politicians. Barring this, many women in politics are from the film industry and already work in the public eye. This is not enough. There needs to be more women who contest as politicians rather than as screen favourites to rectify the lack of eligible women candidates who are dedicated to representing women and their issues.

Nominating more women into Parliament would require active participation of women in everyday politics, but the traditional family structures and the patriarchal attitude of men who resist sharing their power with women result in lack of space for women in Indian politics. Although the number of women engaging with politics has increased over the years, with female turnout in the latest elections reported to be the same as male turnout at 66%, the number of female political candidates remains markedly low. And without female representation in Parliament, women voters will continue to be seen as a source of votes and not facilitators of social change. Efforts from leaders and political parties to get votes from women are superficial at best, with empty promises of empowerment by both the ruling and opposing parties but no significant change being implemented. Real empowerment of women is only possible by actively participating in politics, with women standing up for the rights and issues themselves.

Although law-enforced female representation is a step in the right direction, this is only actionable if more women participate actively in politics. The Women's Reservation Bill has been a huge success in the lower body elections, but there has been considerable resistance in implementing the same model for the Parliamentary elections, as more power and money are involved in this process and the men in charge are reluctant to share the space with their female counterparts. Despite decades of struggle for equality and empowerment, women have to fight every step along the way for recognition and equal rights.

Considering the status of Indian women and the nature of the electoral system, reaching the desired level of female representation in Parliament is hardly possible without drastic change. The elected representatives are supposed to represent the people of the country, and if half of the population are not represented, then clearly something needs to be done. ■

48% **of the voting population** in India are women.

13% **of the Indian Parliament** is represented by females as of 2024; grown from 4.4% over the span of 17 general elections since 1952.

74 **representatives out of the 542 seats in Lok Sabha** (the lower house of the Indian Parliament), are women; gone down by 1.36% from 2019.

24 **representatives out of 224 seats in Rajya Sabha** (the upper house of Parliament), are occupied by women.

797 **out of the 8,360 candidates who were contesting for the general election** of the lower house in 2024 were women.

Ancient Rituals vs Modern Governance

Mongolia's female political leaders confront discriminatory traditions.

Anand Tumurtogoo
Khaliun Amarsaikhan

Enkhbat Bolormaa was drenched from the heavy rain and hail as she ascended Altan Khukhii mountain. As she climbed to the top of the mountain, heavy winds blew. She felt nervous and guilty, as if she were violating something sacred by being there—according to Mongolian tradition, women are not supposed to ascend high mountains. However, she had to be there to deliver the opening words to mark the start of a ritual rite, as it was her duty as the governor of Khovd Province.

In Mongolia, political leaders are obligated to take part in local Buddhist spiritual rituals, such as going to one of the highest peaks in the region and soaking in the first sunlight from the rising sun. However, these rituals typically exclude women from taking part.

Protecting tradition, but at what cost?

Mongolian rituals like fire worship and mountain worship hold great cultural significance, symbolising the nation's deep reverence for nature and ecological balance. These practices were suppressed when Mongolia became a communist nation from 1921 until the 1990s. Now, UNESCO recognises them as a part of an intangible cultural heritage in need of immediate protection. Far from mere superstitions, they are integral to Mongolia's cultural identity and environmental ethos.

And yet, these rites are discriminatory against women and inconsistent with current views of gender equality. According to local tradition, high altitudes are detrimental to women's reproductive health, and therefore they are discouraged from ascending ovoos (holy stone mounds). However, in current times, these beliefs lack scientific justification, and excluding women from significant cultural practices has become a tool to limit women's participation in government affairs.

Mongolian law mandates that the president of Mongolia or a high-ranking state official lead these traditional spiritual ceremonies. And yet, for years, female leaders were excluded from these ceremonies due to long-standing cultural norms.

These norms were challenged in 2011 when women, including MPs, journalists, and staff, were excluded from the State Fire Ceremony held at the Government Palace. This exclusion prompted outrage from women's rights organisations, which viewed it as a violation of the Constitution and a blatant act of discrimination against women. Jurmed Zanaa, head of the Centre for Citizen's Alliance, appealed this exclusion at the Constitutional Court of

Governor Bolormaa in the government palace hallway. Her parliamentary appointment marks a significant step for female representation in Mongolian political leadership. Photograph by Chadraabal Baramsai, 2022.

Mongolia. However, the court upheld the decision, stating that the ceremony did not violate the law according to cultural and traditional practices.

For female politicians, this creates an impossible dilemma. They must either face social ostracism for breaking tradition or be absent from functions their positions legally require them to attend. It is not just about missing a day's event; it impacts the perception of female politicians and can be used as a tool to strategically exclude them from important political processes.

Female representation in Mongolian politics

Women in Mongolia face an uphill battle for their place in the political sphere, which is reflected in their lack of representation at the highest levels of government. The state of female political representation in Mongolia has been uneven since the transition to democracy. Starting with just 3.9% in 1992, it peaked at 11.8% in 2000 before declining

> "According to local tradition, high altitudes are detrimental to women's reproductive health (...) However, in current times, these beliefs lack scientific justification, and excluding women from significant cultural practices has become a tool to limit women's participation in government affairs."

to 3.9% again in 2008. Fortunately, a turning point came about thanks to civil society organisations demanding more female representation, and the State of Great Khural (Parliament) mandated that at least 20% of candidates nominated by parties and coalitions had to be women. This led to a consistent upward trend of women in Parliament since 2012, reaching 17% (13 members) in 2016, which has held steady until 2020. While this demonstrates progress, the numbers still fall short of global averages and Mongolia's own legal quotas.

Davaasuren Enkhjargal, national coordinator of the MONFEMNET National Network, has been advocating for women in Mongolian politics for over 20 years. Her organisation, MONFEMNET, is a coalition of 16 organisations working to strengthen the rights of Mongolian women and other marginalised groups. They successfully lobbied Parliament in 2005 to establish a 30% quota for women in Parliament, but this was repealed in 2007. Enkhjargal contends that without inclusive representation, women in politics must battle tooth and nail to have their opinions heard, particularly when women have been barred from venues conducive to discourse.

'In a time when female representation in politics is insufficient, it is critical that women participate in political discussions. Unfortunately, women do not have the luxury of participating in those talks because of their responsibilities as mothers and wives, as well as how they will be seen on specific occasions,' Enkhjargal explains. This situation underscores the difficult challenges that women in Mongolian politics face as they balance traditional expectations against professional responsibilities.

> "They [female politicians] must either face social ostracism for breaking tradition or be absent from functions their positions legally require them to attend. It is not just about missing a day's event; it impacts the perception of female politicians and can be used as a tool to strategically exclude them from important political processes."

Societal change

In 2023, a collective of civil society groups like MONFEMNET were successful in campaigning for a 30% quota for women in Parliament. According to Enkhjargal, such developments are the result of cultural shifts in attitudes toward women.

'Mongolians, as a nomadic society, have always maintained an egalitarian way of life. However, as a result of foreign cultural influences, we have lost this part of ourselves. But now there is a further significant change: more people are becoming inclined to the idea of women assuming leadership positions. There are still obstacles, but there is some progress,' Enkhjargal stated.

When Bolormaa became the first female provincial governor in September 2022, she was aware that her gender might conflict with her responsibility as a leader and sway public opinion of her. She had accepted the notion that she might not be able to serve her duties out of respect for tradition, but not only did state leadership encourage her to proceed with these traditional rites, local leadership also wanted her to be part of the rituals.

So, Bolormaa found herself standing atop Altan Khukhii mountain, leading a sacred state ceremony. Her presence there challenged centuries of tradition that have long excluded women from such rituals. Bolormaa recounted how all of her worries were swept away when it rained: '[Mongolians] believe rain can be an auspicious moment. And when it rained like it did, I knew the land and mountain accepted my presence.'

Her experience encapsulates the delicate balance Mongolian women in leadership positions must strike between honouring cultural heritage and fulfilling their official duties.

Despite this step forward, challenges remain. Notably, at the executive level, Bolormaa stands as an exception, being the only woman among her fellow governors of provinces and cities. This underrepresentation at various levels of government underscores the importance of addressing the cultural and institutional barriers that Mongolian women in politics continue to face.

Long overdue progress

In 2024, Mongolia held a general parliamentary election. The results of this election created a sig-

nificant shift. Of the 126 newly elected members of the State Great Khural, 32 are women, bringing the proportion of female parliamentarians to 25.4%, one of whom is Bolormaa. This exceeds the global average of 24%, but is still short of the 30% requirement. Looking ahead, Mongolia has set an even loftier goal: beginning in 2028, a 40% quota for female candidates in parliamentary elections will be enforced.

Bolormaa's experience provides insight into how some women navigate this complex terrain. Bolormaa, for example, believes in respecting tradition, regardless of how it may inconvenience her, but she has noticed that Mongolians would rather uphold customs and respect hierarchy regardless of historical conventions. She witnessed this when her duty as a political figure required her to present awards to herders at their houses. They prepared a ceremonial table with a full mutton's back, a highly esteemed dish. Typically, the visiting governor is required to demonstrate respect by being the

> "Her [Bolormaa's] experience demonstrates the dynamic nature of ancient practices as they face modern realities, as well as the nuanced approach required of women in positions of leadership."

The 2011 state fire ceremony in the government palace, attended only by male leaders. This event sparked controversy due to the exclusion of female officials. Photograph courtesy of Democratic Party of Mongolia, 2011.

first to cut the meat during the ceremony. Again, women are not permitted to do this. Bolormaa tackled the complex situation with prudence. She tells me, 'When I went into their homes, I suggested that the male district chief or the head of the household should cut it first, but they kept saying I should do it.' In another notable incident, Bolormaa says, 'The head of the family, an elderly man, said, "No, we have prepared this mutton's back to honour the state, so you must cut it."' Clearly, some people are prepared to break tradition in order to honour both culture and government.

Bolormaa explains, 'This is not a written law, so it is more about feeling the situation and responding accordingly.' Her experience demonstrates the dynamic nature of ancient practices as they face modern realities, as well as the nuanced approach required of women in positions of leadership.

These experiences highlight Mongolia's greater struggle to reconcile its rich cultural history with the demands of a modern, equitable society. As women gain prominence in politics and public life, the country continues to wrestle with how to honour its past while embracing a more diverse future. ■

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Bridging the Gender Gap in the Healthcare Industry

Senglar Laosern, an ophthalmologist in Laos, travels to isolated communities to perform cataract surgeries and provide eye care to those who need it. She is one of only two female opthalmologists in the Oudomxay province. Although women make up a significant portion of the global healthcare workforce, they hold only a small percentage of leadership roles.

Reynald Ramirez

Senglar Laosern, 41, an ophthalmologist, rides a pickup truck with her medical equipment to travel three hours to the Houn district, a geographically-isolated community in Oudomxay Province, northwest of Laos. She is visiting her patient, Lien, a 38-year-old mother of two diagnosed with cataracts that has caused blurry vision in both eyes for more than three years now. Because of this, Lien has had to stop working as a farmer and has been struggling to take care of her two young children. Even more distressing, if left untreated, her eye condition could result in total blindness.

Unfortunately, Lien's is not an isolated case. According to the Laos National Health Insurance Bureau, 94% of the Laos population have some form of pre-paid and pooled insurance, but enrolment in and utilisation of health insurance is not universal. People living in remote areas, ethnic minority groups, and women are less likely to apply for health insurance. These groups then end up paying higher out-of-pocket costs for the treatment and surgery they require, which leaves them vulnerable to financial problems.

Senglar met Lien at a medical outreach event organised by the Oudomxay Provincial Eye Hospital to serve indigent patients from isolated communities.

'Most of the time, the women who come in must take care of their families first. That's why getting treatment isn't their priority. Those who have babies sometimes delay getting treatment. I try to encourage them to get treatment for their own sake as well as their families' sake,' added Senglar, who also juggles taking care of her 6-year-old daughter and maintaining her career as an eye doctor.

This state of affairs has troubling consequences: women are more vulnerable to blindness than men in Laos. While the overall percentage of women with blindness in Laos has decreased, a significant disparity in the prevalence of blindness between men and women still exists, with twice as many women blind compared to men in 2017—a larger gap than for lower levels of vision impairment, according to the Rapid Assessment of Avoidable Blindness in Laos in 2017. The impact that doctors like Senglar who participate in medical outreach programs can have is evident.

> People living in remote areas, ethnic minority groups, and women are less likely to apply for health insurance. These groups then end up paying higher out-of-pocket costs for the treatment and surgery they require, which leaves them vulnerable to financial problems.

Senglar became interested in ophthalmology because she saw how eye surgery changed lives. 'After a 15-minute surgery, they get a new chance in life,' she said.

Today, she will accompany Lien to the hospital where cataract surgery has been scheduled. Senglar will lead the procedure. She conducts cataract surgery on over 10 people in Oudomxay every week.

Gender equity in healthcare leadership

Senglar is the second woman to become an ophthalmologist in the Oudomxay province. She remains ardent in her desire to help her fellow Laotians.

'I make sure that I build a connection with my patients and try to explain to them and their family their diagnosis and how we can treat it. If they understand, they are more confident to undergo treatment,' said Senglar. 'I go out into the field to reach those patients that need my attention, study medicine continuously, and also take care of my own family.'

As a woman, she faced challenges in a male-dominated industry. Sadly, her struggles are part of a wider gender imbalance in the healthcare industry.

Despite occupying 70% of the health workforce globally, women account for just 25% of the influential decision-making positions in healthcare, according to a 2020 report from the World Health Organisation Southeast Asia. Globally, 89% of nurses are women, but senior positions in health facilities and local and central governments are largely occupied by men. Today, female leaders in the region are trying to narrow the leadership gap in the healthcare sector, like Pavasut Leedasawat from Thailand.

Pavasut's health leadership journey started eight years ago when she was appointed head of the Naresuan University optometry program in Phitsanulok, Thailand.

'At that time, I was quite young—about 29 years. This is quite young to be a head of programme,' said Pavasut. 'Because, being a young woman, many people, especially men, don't listen to you and try to question you. You'll get a lot of "why, why, why?"'

Often, she is left frustrated when someone questions if she has checked a decision or action with a man or a more senior person beforehand.

'Even if I'm working with high-level staff—and even if they are women—they still think that if my male counterpart is saying something, it's more reliable,' she said.

Such experiences are just a small part of what inspired Pavasut to become an advocate for paternity leave in Thailand so women can dedicate more time to career development.

'In Thailand, we only allow mothers to have maternity leave. Gender inequity is something that is under the mat. You can't see it. In a lot of workplaces, it appears from the outside that the male and female are equal, but then if you're working inside you'll see women having to take a leave of absence [to raise children], which later affects their career development.'

A similar situation can be observed in Vietnam, where gender stereotypes are still strong. There is a belief that boys need to be prioritised for education and women are expected to focus on family. When Thi Phuong Lien Nguyen enrolled in a master's degree, she remembers her mother's response. 'You're a girl, so don't learn too much.'

Lien said this is a common sentiment in Vietnam, particularly in rural provinces like the one she was raised in. However, Lien has a supportive father. At work, she also has an inspiring role model: HelpAge International Vietnam Country Director Tran Bich Thuy.

Top: Dr Senglar Laosern visiting a patient in the Houn District, a geographically isolated community, to explain the eye procedure she will undergo the next day. Photograph by Reynald Ramirez, 2024.

Bottom: Seven out of 10 Laotians, most of whom are women or ethnic minorities living in remote districts, have difficulty accessing eye care. Doctors like Dr Senglar travel to these areas to provide physical assessments. Photograph by Reynald Ramirez, 2024.


SCAN OPTICS

> Despite occupying 70% of the health workforce globally, women account for just 25% of the influential decision-making positions in healthcare, according to a 2020 report from the World Health Organisation Southeast Asia.

'She encouraged me and said it was a really good chance for me. She is my idol.'

Lien is currently working in Hanoi as Project Lead for HelpAge International, rolling out the Intergenerational Self-Helf Club model that is keeping Vietnam's aging population active and connected to health services, including eye health.

Building networks for gender equity

In February 2024, The Fred Hollows Foundation (an international eye health NGO) and Monash University supported Senglar, Pavasut, Lien, and 12 other female health leaders from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar to attend workshops and build networks that will strengthen their leadership skills.

The Fred Hollows Foundation and Monash University are working to build leadership capacity and networks to address gender inequity in the region. The second leg of the training took place in Bangkok in June.

'Better access and more responsive healthcare for women and girls, including eye health, depends on organisations like The Fred Hollows Foundation to support women's leadership in the sector,' said Global Advocacy Executive Director Jennifer Gersbeck.

The Fred Hollows Foundation has joined with UN Women to launch a policy brief to accelerate progress toward gender equity in eye health and ensure no woman is left behind. It is important to shine a light on women in healthcare and their impactful work, and amplify their voices within the industry.

Senglar said, 'I dream of training the next generation of female eye doctors in Laos—that's why I am making sure that I am doing my job well to encourage them to follow me.' ■

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Top: Ophthalmology is a male-dominated industry, especially in Laos where less than a third of its 34 eye doctors are female. Photograph by The Fred Hollows Foundation, 2022.

Bottom: Thi Phuong Lien Nguyen is defying stereotypes as she pursues a master's degree against societal expectations. In Vietnam, gender stereotypes are still strong. There is a belief that boys should be prioritised for education while women are expected to focus on family. Photograph by Reynald Ramirez, 2024.

Women in Bangladesh are Losing Their Names

In Bangladesh, over 90% women lose their names due to cultural norms rooted in patriarchy. It is time we challenge this tradition and honour women by using their real names, and respect their individual identity.

Md. Ibrahim Khalil

A few days ago, I was sitting on the pavement in Mirpur, Dhaka waiting for a friend. It was crowded, and a 65-year-old woman was sitting next to me. I was quietly reading a newspaper, but after a few minutes, she broke the silence, asking my reason for being there. Then she asked about my profession. When I told her I was a journalist, she was fascinated, and started discussing various topics with me. She told me that she was a housewife, and her husband recently retired from government service. The elder of her two daughters was a teacher and the younger one was looking for a job. Eventually, I asked for her name. Remarkably, she laughed at my question and said, 'Oh God! Does anyone ask the names of people of my age? I am an old lady!' Later, she told me, 'My name is Taslima Ahmed Mimi.' I then asked her why she was surprised when I asked for her name. She said no one had ever asked for her name in the past 20 years. 'No one even called me by my name!' she declared.

In Bangladesh, almost 90% of women like Mimi are losing their names. Women who are over 50 years old have to think hard to remember the last time they were called by their name. Usually, they are called 'bou' (wife) or 'ma' (mother) with the prefix of their husband's or child's name instead of their own. For example, if her husband's name is Michael, then she is called Michael's bou. After having a child, if her child's name is Ali, then she is called Ali's ma.

The way women are addressed also changes based on relationships and age. For example, children call female relatives 'bhabhi' (sister-in-law), 'chachi/fufu/khala' (aunt), or 'daadi/nani' (grandmother), etc. This is the case with most women, even for those in the workplace, especially those who work in middle and lower positions. The only exception seems to be women in high-ranking positions, who may be called by their name in the workplace, but even this is often lost in their family home. The question is, why does this happen?

In South Asian culture, it is considered rude to call elders by their first names. Instead, they are addressed as Bhabhi, Chachi, Daadi, etc. based on their relationship. Like most of the world, Bangladesh is a patriarchal society—everything is male-controlled; the social power structure is male-centric. Society wants women to be identified after their relation to a man. But how does a woman feel when she is addressed thus instead of her name? This practice has been going on for ages, and perhaps this question has never been raised.

We don't question how destitute a woman must feel to lose her name like this. After my encounter with Mimi, I discussed this with some other women. One such woman is Syeda Mahbooba. This 70-year-old lady lives with her son's family. While I was talking to her son, she was sitting on one side of the table serving me breakfast. When I asked her what her name was, she smiled and covered her face with the edge of her saree. She asked me, 'Why do you want to know my name?' Then I asked, 'When was the last time someone called your name?' She replied, 'Long ago, when my father was alive.'

Similarly, I wanted to know the name of Sharmin Begum. Begum, 55, kept laughing when I asked for her name. She has been working in Dhaka for about eight years as a helping hand in different houses

> Women who are over 50 years old have to think hard to remember the last time they were called by their name. Usually, they are called 'bou' (wife) or 'ma' (mother) with the prefix of their husband's or child's name instead of their own.

across the capital. She hears her name only when she visits her village. She is mostly called Rabiul's mother, in acknowledgement of her eldest son. In fact, a woman in Bangladesh usually only hears her name when she is at her father's house, where their parents and elders address her by name. As soon as these people pass away, so does the name of a woman. Begum is currently only called by name by her elder brother.

Initially, I thought the patriarchal structure of our society was responsible for this situation and was interested to explore the scenario in matriarchal families. After going through government documents, I found two tribal societies in Bangladesh that have matriarchal family systems: the Garo tribe and the Khasia tribe. The Garos live in the Garo hills in the Mymensingh region, and the Khasias live in different areas of the Sylhet region. Since the Garos live closer to Dhaka, I visited Garo Hills in Jamalpur in the eastern part of Bangladesh.

In the matriarchal Garo tribe, property or land is owned by women. When a Garo man gets married, he moves into his wife's residence and helps her with agricultural and other household chores. The core decisions in the family are usually made by women. Any children they have adopt their mother's surname. In general, their society has very different rules than the majority of Bangladeshi society. And yet, the women of the indigenous Garo community are also losing their names. Under the influence of wider society, patriarchal influences are invading their matriarchal community. As a result, Garo women are being added to the list of lost names. For example, Milon Dangu, a Garo woman, is now over 60 years old. Now no one calls her by her name because her parents and elders are dead. When I asked her, 'Do you feel happy when someone calls you by your name?' She replied, 'Who is not happy to be called by her name?'

While walking around the Garo hills, I visited another tribal woman's house. There, a Bengali woman is working as a labourer for the household. The 57-year-old tribal woman is Padma Sangma, and the 58-year-old Bengali woman is Zainab Begum. Most of their elders have passed. As a result, no one calls them by name anymore. They themselves admitted that they would be happy to be called by their names. At one point, I asked them the names of their grandmothers. While they could tell me the names of their grandfathers, they could not recall the names of their grandmothers.

After observing this scenario in both patriarchal and matriarchal communities, I decided to investigate a society where women lived outside of the familial structure. I visited one of the largest brothels in South Asia at Dauldia in the Rajbari district. I spoke to 40-year-old sex worker Kulsum Khatun , who said that after fraudsters sold her to the brothel, she could not escape. She has been in the brothel for almost 25 years, but has never told anyone her name for fear of revealing her identity which would cause social disgrace to her family. For professional reasons, every client calls her by a different name. To date, she has been known by eight to 10 different names. Incredibly, even women living outside of the patriarchal and matriarchal homes are unable to retain their real names.

And so the question is, why do women have to sacrifice their names? In a patriarchal society where the restrictions of religion, society, and family run deep, we may never discover the answer. During our chat, Begum said, 'I feel good when someone calls by my name. Maybe all women like it. If it was customary to call Sharmin Apa, Sharmin Khala, or Sharmin Dadi without hiding the name, it would not be all bad!'

I don't know whether women like Sharmin Begum, Mimi, Milon Dangu, Zainab, Padma, or Kulsum will ever get their names back. But I believe that no woman's name should become unfamiliar to her. Instead of this degenerated practice, let's start calling women by their names. ■

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Eco-Friendly Products for Environmentally-Friendly Lifestyles

Sreypich Mao

Aok Sochenda in her store surrounded by recycled products. Photograph by Siv Channa, 2023.

Aok Sochenda has turned her passion for preserving the environment into a full-time job. Her company, Zerow Station, aims to equip people with the tools for an environmentally-friendly lifestyle.

This story first appeared in Kiripost.

Having lived and promoted a zero-waste way of living for five years, 26-year-old Aok Sochenda has started her business, Zerow Station, to provide people with the tools to live an environmentally-friendly lifestyle.

'Many people ask me, if they want to maintain an environmentally-friendly lifestyle, how can they do it? Also, where can they find or buy all the things they need? That is the reason I opened Zerow Station,' Sochenda said.

People can find many eco-friendly products and art at Zerow Station, which opened in February as a part of Chnai Market. One popular product is the refillable soap. 'Customers can bring their bottle and refill it at our place. Also, if they forget to bring it, we have more reusable bottles for them,' Sochenda said.

Sochenda graduated from university in Hungary majoring in Business Administration. Before launching Zerow Station, she was a content creator at ZeroW, an EU-funded project dedicated to inform and inspire people to become zero-wasters. While there, she was inspired to live a waste-free lifestyle in late 2018 after travelling and getting involved in similar social activities.

'While I shared tips to live without waste for work, I began to have more interest in zero waste myself,' the business owner from Tboung Khmum said.

Turning to green business

Zerow Station is part of the movement to positively contribute to the environment. However, Sochenda calls for individuals to work together to increase awareness and take more action.

'In Europe, they have turned to a green economy, both companies and consumers. Being conscious consumers and producers is important,' she said. 'So, we in Asia should turn to that as well, albeit slightly later than they have.'

Despite the head start that Europe has in environmentally-friendly living, Sochenda has noticed that Cambodians are becoming more conscious of their impact on the environment. The numerous campaigns and social media promotions about reducing plastic waste proves that they are aware of its effects. However, they do not know what to do.

'People are starting to be aware, but they haven't taken action,' she said.

As one of those most vulnerable countries to climate change, Cambodia is hotter than before, and

there is an increase in sporadic rain. Sochenda stresses the need for more action.

Besides that, she requests that people take responsibility for themselves.

'Plastic and waste do play a part in those issues, but I think it's our mindset that's most important. We need to be responsible consumers and use our resources wisely,' she said. 'When we use a product, we should consider all of its components and how they will affect the environment. It is our responsibility to consume conscientiously in order to combat climate change.'

Sochenda emphasises the far-reaching consequences of climate change, from economic repercussions to a significant impact on agriculture, which is an important sector of the nation's economy. 'Therefore, we have to take action,' she urged.

Eco-friendly products can save costs

The main difficulty that Sochenda faces is the slow uptake of her products in the local community. As eco-friendly products are more expensive, locals have not fully embraced them yet.

'For producers in the community, we want to give them a reasonable price,' she said. 'But eco-products still cost higher than mass produce.'

But even though eco-products are more expensive, Sochenda explained that incorporating them into one's lifestyle does not have to cost a lot of money.

'Sometimes a product is pricey, but it lasts a very long time. While others are inexpensive, we can only use them for a short period of time,' she said. She added the concept of refuse, reuse, reduce, recycle, and root may occasionally help individuals save money. 'Using secondhand products is cost-effective and benefits the environment.'

Besides that, as a business owner and seller, Sochenda doesn't want her consumers to overbuy or purchase unnecessary items. She wants her customers to buy only what they need.

'This is a zero-waste concept and a cornerstone of life. If you don't require it, don't purchase it,' she said.

On 24 August 2023, Sochenda was honoured with the 2nd ASEAN Youth Eco-Champions Award in Laos in recognition of her efforts and significant contribution to realising a clean and green environment. She continues to encourage others to take part in preserving the environment.

'They can start by raising their own awareness and then taking action, such as reducing waste, planting trees, or cleaning. Also, they can support people working on promoting the environment,' she said. 'We can do this together.' ■

> "Sochenda has noticed that Cambodians are becoming more conscious of their impact on the environment. The numerous campaigns and social media promotions about reducing plastic waste proves that they are aware of its effects. However, they do not know what to do."

Sreypich Mao, 22, is a journalist from Kiripost, a digital media company in Cambodia. While pursuing a bachelor's degree in media and communications, she worked as a trainee at Newsroom Cambodia, hosted by the Cambodian Centre for Independent Media. She also completed a six-month internship at the Voice of Democracy in 2021. Sreypich has always held a strong interest in journalism since she was in university. She has covered various topics including global affairs, business, female empowerment, social issues, and digital rights.

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Women Are Made Tougher and Stronger

Filipina wrestler fights 'macho culture' and misogyny in and out of the wrestling ring.

Rosette Adel

Filipina wrestler Racine Anne 'Super P' Castro smiles as she pins down opponent Joey Rosas at the Pinoy Wrestling Night. Photograph courtesy of Fight Sport Manila, 2024.

At 31, a Filipina wrestler is proving *that gender is not a hindrance in the pursuit of one's dreams.*

Racine Anne Castro, a professional wrestler and a full-time writer, is better known as her wrestling character, 'Super P'. She has wanted to become a pro-wrestler since a young age, and at the age of 31, the five-foot-tall Filipina has finally fulfilled this dream.

Castro first entered the wrestling scene in 2016, training to become a pro-wrestler along with a few female wrestlers in the Philippines. She shared that entering the male-dominated sport was not an easy feat, with her and her fellow women wrestlers facing the hegemony of macho culture and misogyny in and outside of the ring.

Philippine wrestling was popularised in 1989 through a short-lived show titled Pinoy Wrestling that aired on national TV on the state network, PTV-4. Wrestling enthusiasts later founded professional wrestling promotions the Philippine Wrestling Revolution and the Manila Wrestling Federation (now defunct) in 2013 and 2014, respectively. These were mostly led by male wrestlers until Vernice Crystal Gabriel, popularly known as Crystal, joined and became the first Filipina wrestler in 2015.

Together with Castro, who cited Crystal—now dubbed the Queen of Philippine Wrestling—as one of her mentors and inspirations, they and fellow female wrestlers are slowly inspiring Filipina wrestler enthusiasts and helping shape the future of Philippine wrestling.

In this interview, Castro detailed her beginnings and what it takes for a Filipina like her to break the barrier in the male-dominated sport in patriarchal Philippines.

Rosette Adel: Can you share your journey into wrestling and what inspired you to pursue it?

Racine Anne 'Super P' Castro: Ever since I was in elementary school, I'd always said that I wanted to be a pro wrestler when I grew up, but no one ever really took it seriously. How could they? We lived in a small town in an upper-region province of a third-world country with no pro wrestling industry. It seemed too far-fetched that I would achieve the same life as my WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) heroes on TV, so I settled for writing fanfiction, then eventually pursuing a career as a writer.

It was 2014 when I learned that someone had started a pro wrestling promotion in Manila—the Philippine Wrestling Revolution (PWR). I was already living in the city at the time, so I attended as many shows as I could. But I was overweight, depressed, and had no trace of an athletic background, so I settled for just being a supporter of our local scene.

After seeing my wrestling heroes in person when I was living abroad in 2018, I was inspired to come home to the Philippines and finally start training at PWR. I was 26 then, which meant I had started a bit late compared to the others, but I was willing to go all-in. When I was young, I dreamt of becoming a pro wrestler, and I couldn't bear living the rest of my life without giving it a try.

What's the story behind your wrestling persona 'Super P'?

I had always been a fan of superhero comics, and one particular character resonated with me: Ms Marvel aka Kamala Khan. Like me, she was a superhero superfan—and a fellow fanfic writer, too!—but she had to navigate the challenges of becoming a hero herself. I felt similarly when I started pro wrestling training, in that I was in the presence of local wrestling heroes while I was learning how to become one. Inspired by Ms Marvel's story, I decided to adopt a similar superhero-in-the-making persona in the hopes that I, too, could learn how to fly and fight like my heroes in the ring. Growing up, I had no Filipina pro wrestling hero to look up to. I can only do my best to try and be that for young Filipina fans.

Who are the female figures or mentors who have influenced or inspired you?

If there's one match that sparked my desire to become a pro wrestler, it's Lita vs Trish Stratus in the first-ever women's main event on WWE Raw in 2004. I remember whispering to myself, 'I want to be that,' in front of the TV after the bell had rung and the match had ended. Until today, I go back to that match each time I want to remind myself why I'm doing this.

In 2015, I was in the audience when the first Filipina pro wrestler of the modern era debuted. Her name is Crystal, known in Southeast Asia as the Queen of Philippine Wrestling. During her debut match, I was in the front row, cheering my lungs out for her. At the end of that show, I approached Crystal during the meet-and-greet and she became the very first person to encourage me to train to become a wrestler. She was also among the coaches who taught me the fundamentals. I owe a lot to Crystal.

What are the challenges have you faced as a female wrestler and how did you overcome them?

Over the years, I've faced both physical and mental challenges. I tore my medial meniscus while training in 2019 and my ACL in 2022. After crowdsourcing enough funds, I had to go through surgery and nine months of recovery, which required learning how to walk again. And yet the perception of the Filipino public remains—that pro wrestling is fake. The pain

Left: Filipina wrestler Racine Anne Castro, also known as 'Super P'. Photograph by Cholo Gonzales, 2024.

Filipina wrestler Racine Anne 'Super P' Castro celebrates her win with her tag team partner, Patricia Ligaia, at the Pinoy Wrestling Night. Photograph by Nigel Abellera, 2024.

is real. The challenges are real. The injuries are real. I've also faced the wrath of misogyny and macho culture when I started having public matches. Men are quick to comment obscenities on Facebook whenever female wrestlers post clips of our matches. 'Mag-wrestling na lang tayo sa kama!' 'Ayos ah nakahawak sa p*ke.' 'Dapat hindi nilalaban ang babae sa lalaki.' ['Let's just wrestle in bed!' 'Nice, holding the vagina.' 'Women should not fight male wrestlers.'] And many more. Being a pro wrestler isn't easy. Being a female pro wrestler in patriarchal Philippines just dials it up to extra hard mode.

Can you cite a memorable moment in your wrestling journey and why it is your favourite?

At the biggest Philippine pro wrestling event held by our old promotion in 2023, I was involved in an all-women four-way match with my fellow Pinay wrestlers Chelsea Marie, Joya, and Patricia Ligaia. The match was historic, as it was the promotion's first-ever multi-woman bout. I won the match, but I wouldn't say that was what made this moment my favourite. It was after the match, when I was given some mic time to talk about my journey and invite other women to come train with us—just as Crystal

> A big aspect of professional wrestling is the performative flair—the costumes, the storytelling spectacle, the colourful characters. Because of pro wrestling's innate exuberance (...), Pinay wrestlers are given the chance to show that we can be girly and expressive while kicking butt.

> All of these barriers just prove that women are made tougher and stronger. We endure more; hence, we are forged to be stronger. I think sometimes we forget that.

had invited me. There, in the ring, all of us Pinay wrestlers stood hand-in-hand, opening the doors for more women to become pro wrestlers.

How do you think female Filipino wrestlers are shaping the perception of female athletes?

A big aspect of professional wrestling is the performative flair—the costumes, the storytelling spectacle, the colourful characters. Because of pro wrestling's innate exuberance compared to other combat sports like MMA (Mixed Martial Arts), Pinay wrestlers are given the chance to show that we can be girly and expressive while kicking butt. And with intergender matches, we are also able to show that women can fight just as well and just as hard as men.

What changes or initiatives would you like to see to support and promote female wrestlers in the Philippines?

In 10 years of modern Philippine pro wrestling, there has never been a women's division. It has been elusive, mostly because there are never enough women—in any promotion—to establish a division. Not enough women sign up for pro wrestling training, let alone survive it. The change I would most like to see in our industry is to have more women coming in to train. Our training facility, The Factory, has taken the initiative of offering free training for any woman who signs up. That means they don't have to pay for weekly training, which typically costs about a hundred pesos (USD1.76) per session. If we get more female trainees, we can potentially have enough female wrestlers to start our own division and, eventually, a championship title.

What advice would you give to aspiring wrestlers and women who are facing barriers in their respective fields?

Female wrestlers face more challenges outside the ring compared to the men. On top of what we go through in the ring, we deal with misogyny, perverts, and the pains of monthly periods, too. It's the same for other women facing barriers in other industries that are programmed to their disadvantage. Women are often underestimated and undervalued.

But all of these barriers just prove that women are made tougher and stronger. We endure more; hence, we are forged to be stronger. I think sometimes we forget that. We must always feel empowered by that thought.

So what's next for you?

Together with the former roster of our old promotion, my colleagues and I have built a new pro wrestling company called Puso Wrestling. Our goal is to establish it as the heart and home of Pinoy Wrestling, both in the Philippines and around the world. We want Puso to be the platform where fans of our industry—both here and abroad—can watch, follow, and support Pinoy wrestlers…and, of course, Pinay wrestlers. ■

Rosette Adel is a Manila-based online journalist since 2015. Concurrently, she is an editor for Philstar.com and its sister news outlet, *Interaksyon*, which reframes online conversations. Her work covers breaking news, investigative, and mobile reporting about diverse issues in the Philippines, particularly on tourism, heritage, and politics, among others. Rosette also covers pageants, food, and entertainment-related events. She is an Adenauer Fellow of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and is pursuing her graduate studies at the Asian Centre for Journalism, Ateneo de Manila University.

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Taking the Longcut

Trying to understand the female body is like staring into an abyss.

Prateebha Tuladhar

This story first appeared in Nepali Times.

Prateebha Tuladhar is Adenauer Fellow from 2009 and holds a master's degree in journalism. She lives in Kathmandu, writes for Nepali Times, teaches journalism at Asian universities, and talks to dogs and trees.

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On one February evening in 2024, four women ambled up the winding road on the foothills of the Shivapuri Conservation Area, in Kathmandu, Nepal. Four women, three in their 30s, the fourth in her 40s. They chatted, laughed, and stopped once as one of them knelt down to tie a shoelace that had come undone. Stopped again to see if the gelato place was still open. But it was 10:30 p.m. and the lights were out.

So in the dimness of the night, partially guided by the moon, the women continued uphill, following the grey path, snaking upward towards their accommodation. Their conversation continued to bear the cheerful tone from dinner. They had met after work, eaten together, walked past the Panther Crossing, and then up and up.

'This is lovely,' the oldest of the group said, recalling that for her 30th birthday she had booked herself a table at a pizzeria in town, next to a dreamy garden. She had ordered a vegetarian paesana pizza, some wine, and a salad. She had eaten her meal slowly, in silence, except for the occasional interaction with the servers.

Some guests at the neighbouring tables had wondered what a Nepali woman was doing eating by herself at a Kathmandu restaurant. Some wondered if she had been stood up. But what had actually happened was, the woman had put on her favourite sandals and left home at 6 p.m. so she could enjoy a meal alone.

Between eating, she smiled to herself, satisfied with her ability to make a point. What most women want is to be able to buy their own meals, sit in safe places doing what they like doing, and then to return home to some peace and quiet. It's not any different from what men want. Yet, it is often harder for women to experience. And much harder perhaps for those who identify beyond the gender binary.

When the world holds up a mirror at you, female friends are what is reflected back.

So as the group climbed uphill, the woman shared that the evening was four-fold more joyous from what she had experienced on her birthday a decade ago. For she was now celebrating not one, but four women, mostly single but not unhappy. Four women paying their own bills, chatting unabashedly about their Tinder preferences, discussing work interests, trees, architecture, and, of course, food!

They wondered out loud what meeting each other earlier in their lives would have meant for them; how and if it would have shaped their personalities, thoughts, and life events differently. Perhaps they would have saved each other from some of the worst days of their lives. Because that's what female friendships are—these friends are the ones who see you through heartbreaks and hardships, they are the ear you confide in when no one else in the world will listen. Sometimes, female friendships are merely about sitting across each other stuffing your cheeks with food while tears run down your face, and you come away a bit stronger to cope with the circumstances, better prepared to cradle a broken heart.

Female friends are who you go to to discuss your periods, pregnancy tests, PMS, and menstrual cramps. As you age, you go to them to discuss stretch marks and they will say tigresses are gorgeous. You also discuss the imminent perimenopause. What does it mean to acknowledge that the body will keep changing as we age?

Trying to understand the female body is like staring into an abyss. The result of mood swings, brain fogs, hot flushes, and irritability are not part of your personality, but what you go through biologically as your body starts to become a conundrum, and they affect who you become. Trying to understand your own reproductive system can be confusing, making you anxious about what lies ahead. It is possible to miss the feeling of having periods when they do not come. And if you are a woman without children and you have arrived at menopause, something has been lost forever, regardless of your take on motherhood. You will be seen by the world as a woman who is barren and cold, and perhaps frigid. But girlfriends will continue to hold you, even as you flounder in uncertainty.

When the world holds up a mirror at you, female friends are what is reflected back. The person in the reflection is a woman thorough with her work. She pays attention to details, loves fiercely, tenderly. She takes care of others and goes through life laughing, sharing, and growing even when life is a chase. She keeps her own space, maintains boundaries and opens up when her guard must be let down.

The woman in her 40s watched her younger companions with a full heart. She laughed when one of them joked about the dog nudging her awake in the morning. Later, as they sat at breakfast, she watched in admiration as one of them drew fine dark lines around her eyes with eyeliner between sips of her coffee.

She noticed her young friends revel at the sight of the light between the trees and sunlight on flowers. She noticed they were not at all scared to take chances, to open up their hearts to love, even if love must eventually be lost.

Many years ago, one of the three young women had said that she wanted to grow up to be like her; to work, to travel, and to write. And quietly, she had hoped the young girl would never have to be like her, for her own path had been dotted with obstacles. But over the years she learnt all paths are lined with hurdles, and we all fly over them when we get there. And as she observed her young friends, hope brimmed inside her. She started hoping that she would become a little bit like each one of them—unapologetic, and free. ■

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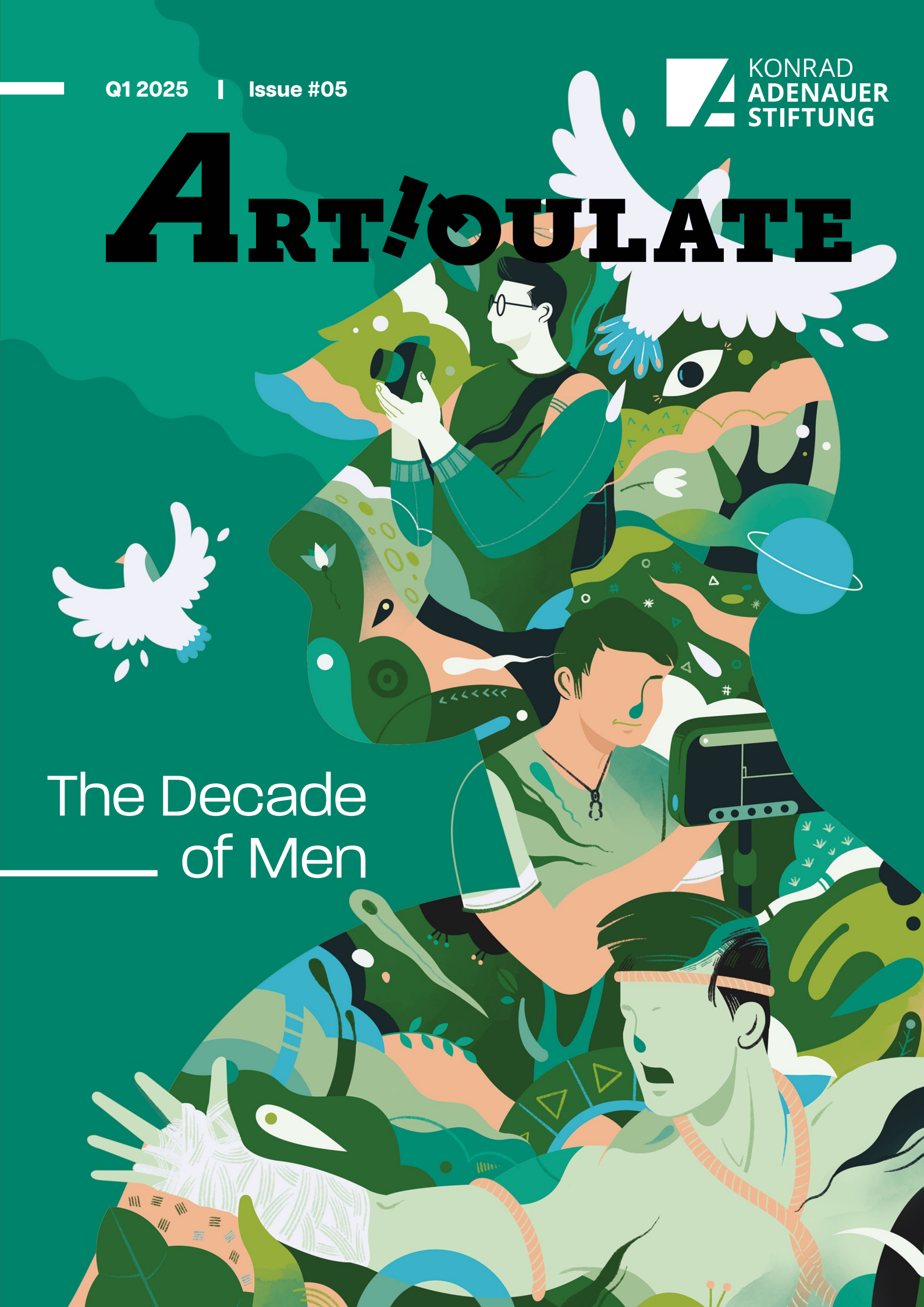
ART!CULATE



The Decade of Men

Edsa Skyline

Dusk scene in the capital city of the Philippines.
Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024.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Foreword

The "Decade of Men" is not a declaration but a question: Is it a decade of masculinity? Or is it the farewell of masculinity? And: What is masculinity? Is masculinity and with it the man transformed in our era of so many transformations? It impacts energy questions, borders and nation states in times of worldwide migration, multiple dimensions of society, governance (look at Trump!), and technology like in AI and meanwhile Artificial General Intelligence (AGI).

And, for sure, there is the gender issue. We have not only two but 72 genders? Allow me to doubt that...

But without any doubt the meaning or role of masculinity is changing. In the narratives, to a certain degree also in the reality of all cultures there were fighters, mostly males: knights, Shaolin monks, martial artists, bushrangers, bandit kings, outlaws—and when they became too impertinent, the Seven Samurai or the Magnificient Seven showed up to rescue civilians, mostly women and children, against villains and criminals. The heroes, but also the evildoers, were men.

Sure, that was only fantasy, but these fantasies have faded away. "Marker!", as they shout in Hollywood studios (and probably also in other fantasy factories), and: "New scene!" Female heroes appear nowadays in movies, from Hollywood to Bollywood and C-dramas, many of them even outlaws. We have Uma Thurman as "Kiddo" in Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" saga as well as Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon". Some of them are driven by the desire to be free from the gender role imposed on them. That's transformation at its best.

Having said that, I am looking for a decade where all roles are accepted, for men and for women. But including men with a conventional understanding of masculinity—transformation should broaden our choices, not narrow them.

With this in mind, I would like to thank all the authors and photographers who have contributed to this flip cover The Decade of Men and The Decade of Women. I hope it finds interested readers.

Ansgar Graw

Director
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd.
Media Programme Asia

KAS
Media Programme Asia Events

International Media Conference

Manila, Philippines
23–26 June 2024

Technology has increasingly blurred the lines between fact and fiction. Journalists and media consumers now grapple with profound challenges (and opportunities) when navigating an evolving information ecosystem. Which facts matter when the news is reported? Whose facts matter when decisions are made? 'The Future of Facts' was the theme of this year's International Media Conference that was jointly hosted by the KAS Media Programme Asia and the East West Centre in Manila, Philippines. We examined a wide range of topics, including reporting on climate change, regional geopolitics, and how media can begin leveraging technological advancements to reduce risk to their profession and their audiences. Over 400 journalists, global thought leaders, climate experts, policymakers, technologists, and indigenous voices from over 35 countries gathered to spark vital discussions and foster cross-border collaborations. Attendees left the event with the knowledge and tools to navigate a world where discerning the truth is more critical than ever, an imperative in working towards a more equitable and informed future.


THE FUTURE OF FACTS
EAST-WEST CENTER
INTERNATIONAL MEDIA CONFERENCE
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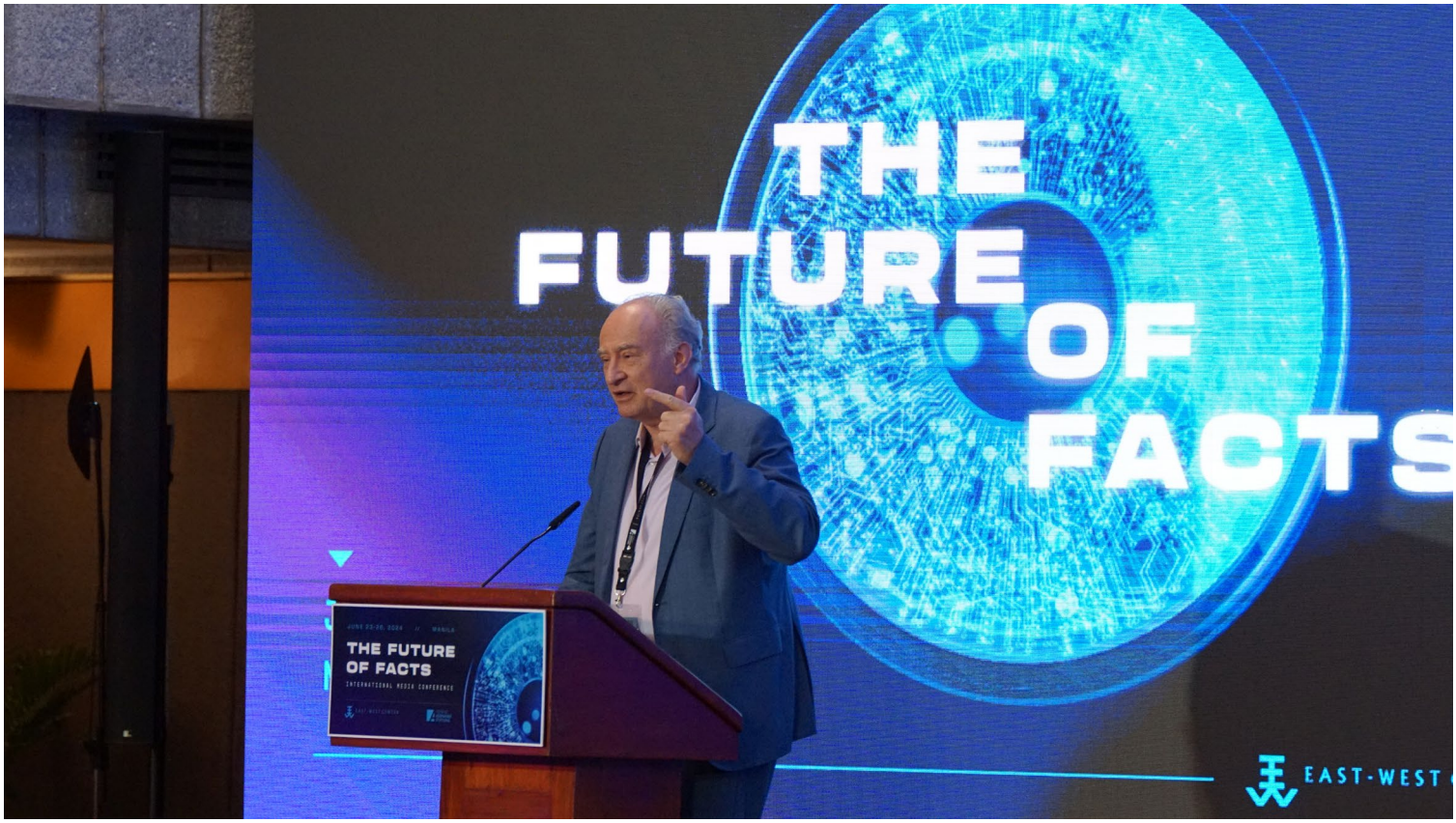
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Splice Beta

Chiang Mai, Thailand
5–7 November 2024

Photo: The diverse group of participants at Splice Beta 2024. Photograph courtesy of Splice Beta.

The KAS Media Programme Asia was once again proud to support Splice Beta, a dynamic media conference designed to inspire innovation and collaboration within the media industry. Splice Beta serves as a vibrant platform for media professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders of thought to exchange ideas, explore new trends, and forge meaningful partnerships. This year, we explored topics such as diversifying revenue streams, leveraging technology to improve storytelling, and fostering inclusive and collaborative communities. Over three days, experts shared their knowledge on subscription models, ethical AI in journalism, audience engagement, and the importance of mental health in newsroom culture. Curated workshops also provided practical insights into digital transformation and new monetisation techniques. Attended by 250 participants representing 132 organisations from across 48 countries, the 'Splice Beta ecosystem' has been dubbed as the community leading the Asian media renaissance, with this gathering marking a celebration of creativity, resilience, and the spirit of experimentation that defines modern media. Our support of this event and its participants reaffirms our commitment to fostering creativity, resilience, and quality journalism in the ever-evolving media landscape.

Strategies for Security in the Pacific Region

Canberra, Perth, Australia
28 October–2 November 2024

Photo: The group visiting the Australian War Memorial in Kings Park, Perth. Photograph by Matt Jelonek

Journalists specialising in security policy took part in a research trip to Australia organised by the KAS Media Programme Asia. The agenda began in Canberra with a conference on security policy in the Pacific, hosted by Bertil Wenger, director of the Regional Programme Australia and the Pacific. Speakers such as Japanese Ambassador Kazuhiro Suzuki, Jennifer Parker and David Andrews from the National Security Council, German Members of Parliament Tilman Kuban and Nicolas Zippelius, as well as Matthew Clarke from Deakin University, provided deep insights into the security architecture in the Pacific region and its challenges. The journalists from Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, and Germany then travelled to Perth to meet with security experts such as Kate O'Shaughnessy, Paul Haskel Dowland, and Helge Janicke, as well as entrepreneurs Karl Hofmann and Mike Deeks. Accompanied by Honorary Consul Gabriele Maluga, the group also visited the Luerssen Shipyard and the State War Memorial and were guests at the ANZAC House. The main takeaway: security has to be secured. ■

Jilson Tiu is a freelance photographer and photojournalist. He contributes to various corporations and NGOs in both print and online platforms, local and abroad. His personal work revolves around environmental and social issues. He loves black coffee.

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Summer Bus

A child smiling in the window of a public bus in Manila as the sun's rays reflect off his sunglasses. The world has seen a record-breaking heat index in 2024 due to climate change. Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024.


santarosa
TERS BUS CORP.

Hollow Homes
Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024.

Workers taking a break at a construction site in Pasay, Metro Manila Philippines. The Philippines has seen a growth in property sales due to online gambling firms, aka POGOs (Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators). In recent times, President Bongbong Marcos banned all POGO companies due to the illegal activities including prostitution, money laundering, and abuse conducted inside the buildings.

Men: Sensitive or Fragile? Are We an Endangered Minority?

Ansgar Graw is the director of the Media Programme Asia at the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation Ltd. in Singapore. The journalist and former TV host has published numerous books on Donald Trump, international affairs and German politics, amongst others, and has a strong focus on business journalism through his work with the German media outlets Die Welt (e.g. as correspondent in Washington D.C.) and The European.

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Ansgar Graw

Men are a minority. Worldwide, there are slightly more boys born than girls, but the number of adult men is lower than that of women because men die earlier—on a global average, five years before women. In some countries, this is due to wars, violent crime (in which men are more likely to be involved than women) and very often to cardiovascular disease. Men also tend to live less healthily, indulge in more alcohol and tobacco (which, as we all know, doesn't prolong life, but we do it anyway), not to mention the fact that stressful full-time jobs often lead to cardiovascular disease—at least that's how statistics and scientists explain it.

We can therefore be surprised that women, who often hold down similarly stressful full-time jobs, plus the bulk of the household, plus the bulk of bringing up children, *plus* the strains of childbirth, supposedly suffer from fewer stress-related illnesses. The explanation for this is logical: women are, probably, simply much more resistant to stress. But if that's the case, don't we men deserve pity for having a hard time in life?

The misery starts in infancy. While the association of masculinity with strength and femininity with weakness is widely believed, it is incorrect. Nature has arranged it exactly the other way round. Boys are born prematurely more often, and fewer of them survive the first critical weeks than baby girls. Baby boys are more susceptible to infections and have less immune strength. They are also at a greater risk to be born with genetic irregularities, simply because they only have one X chromosome, alongside the Y chromosome which makes them male, and cannot compensate if their one X chromosome is suboptimally developed. You can read all about this at www.ourworldindata.org. This phenomenon is similarly witnessed in Asia; it has been scientifically confirmed. 'This is the first study that systematically documents the status of male health in Asia which confirms that Asian men have a shorter life expectancy and higher mortality compared to Asian women,' write Chirk Jenn Ng, Chin Hai Teo, and Christopher Chee Kong in the study titled 'The Status of Men's Health in Asia' in *Preventive Medicine*, Volume 71, February 2015.

This divide continues after childhood. Young men lead riskier lives. I have not heard about many young women who try to impress their friends by speeding their first car through a curve with screeching tires or flying down the highway on a motorcycle without a helmet in a grand show of 'masculinity'. This can be observed regularly with men (perhaps we should

return to the term 'boys' at this point), and brings back a lot of old personal memories. Incidentally, boys and men also commit suicide more often than girls and women. Are we more sensitive? Or simply more fragile? But there is another reason why things are not looking good for men: we are constantly on trial. We are too selfish, too dominant, too brutal, as several sources say. We are seen as warriors and rapists. There are calls around the world for us men to change, to make room for women, to become more feminine ourselves if possible—in K-dramas, for example, the men are beautiful, slim, and androgynous; they are enviably perfect. In light of this, it's not always women who badmouth us, it is often ourselves. Prince Edward, the Duke of Edinburgh, said with regard to global crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war between Israel and Hamas and, undeniably, climate change: 'Men are not doing a good job at the moment.'

I am the father of a daughter who will be graduating from high school in a few months, and I am happy that she will have many more opportunities open to her than the women of my generation, not to mention my mother's generation. Women as entrepreneurs, women as heads of government, women as astronauts, women as top managers, women as leading scientists—all this is not only possible but has become the norm in many (though unfortunately not all) countries and societies today.

I grew up in a time when the differences between men and women were strictly defined. In films and novels, the man was the warrior (not necessarily with a gun and uniform, but often with a big wallet and business suit) and the woman was the caretaker. The nurse, or the doctor. Or the smarter companion, who was the one to tell him at the end of the narrative: the battle is over.

I know, these are absurd stereotypes. As if there hasn't always been unwarlike men, and tough, battle-hardened women never existed before the 21st century.

The history of female decision-makers in politics goes back very far. Ancient Egypt had six female pharaohs, the British Monarchy had 12 queens and in Ancient China the Tang dynasty was interrupted when Wu Zetian, a former concubine, became the first and only empress of China (690–703). Nevertheless, it is undisputed that men have a great leading edge in all political fields, apart from exceptions like the aforementioned, they ruled almost alone for the first millennia.

In modern times, there have been female prime ministers for almost 65 years. It started in Asia: in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected the first female head of government in the world in 1960. She ruled until 1965 and was later re-elected to office twice more, most recently from 1994 to 2000. But apart from her, there is only one other woman in the country's long list of prime ministers that is otherwise comprised of men, men, men. So while the number of queens, female prime ministers, and female presidents is impressive, it is not an exhaustive one.

Is this because men meet in back rooms and prevent women from advancing? Or that women take care of the household and children more than men and therefore have no time for pursuing their own careers, whether in politics or in the private sector? Or could it be a mixture of these factors—plus the possibility that there are fewer women who want to fight their way to the top, for whatever reason?

The first freely-elected female head of state (not to be confused with prime minister, the head of the government) in the world was Finnish President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, in office from 1980 to 1996. Then followed two men, and this year Icelanders once again elected a female president, Halla Tómasdóttir. Since then, the world has seen many strong women in important offices, from Indira Gandhi in India and Golda Meir in Israel, to Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Angela Merkel in Germany. In November, we will learn whether the United States, still widely considered the number one powerhouse in the world, will be run by a woman, Kamala Harris.

Other strong women in politics include Eva 'Evita' Perón, who acted like Argentina's president but was, formally, the first lady. As a woman with larger-than-life charisma, she sparked a persona cult around herself and around 'Peronism', a form of socialism-lite.

In Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wajed has just been hounded out of office by protesting students and rebelling security forces because of her increasingly authoritarian government practices. And Kim Yo Jong, the younger sister of Kim Jong Un, is being touted as the potential next dictator of North Korea, the first female dictator. So women are not necessarily the better, softer, nicer gender—perhaps, contrary to stereotypical assumptions, the man is sometimes the vegetarian and the woman the carnivore? Perhaps, both men and women are complex and nuanced individuals whose autonomous minds defy stereotypes.

And yet, there are other areas where I am grateful that women have taken the burden off us and will continue to do so. Yes, I love having a child, but I also love the fact that I didn't have to give birth to her. Thank you, dear Anja, and my thanks go to all the mothers in the world, including mine, for sure!

So what did I want to complain about? What do I have to whine about? That the man's age of unchallenged dominance is passing? Forget it. The times are changing, and we are changing with them. But maybe not fast enough. ■

Why Patriarchy Fails Everyone, Including Men

Patriarchy not only oppresses women, it also harms men by enforcing toxic masculinity and unrealistic standards.

Wara Irfan

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There's no doubt that prevailing social and cultural norms remain predominantly patriarchal. Despite the progress made by feminist movements and the impact of prominent waves of feminism worldwide—albeit unevenly spread across regions—a quick glance at data from key industries reveals that men continue to dominate every socioeconomic sphere.

Patriarchy, used in feminist theory to characterise male dominance in society, fundamentally suppresses female autonomy and freedom, and arguably continues to be the state of affairs across the globe. A glance at social media today reveals men of all ages using language that degrades women. Moreover, according to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017–18, 28% of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence since turning 15. However, since such cases are often hidden under a veil of shame, these figures are likely to be significantly underestimated.

Much has been discussed about how this misogynistic structure benefits men, both in the global South and North. Yet one needs to explore the ways men fall victim to patriarchy as well.

Patriarchy is the breeding ground for ideologies that are damaging to men as well as women. Toxic masculinity, an aspect of patriarchy, can be defined

> Patriarchy, in its attempt to elevate men, places them on a pedestal so high that any deviation from the unrealistic standards of manhood results in societal punishment and ostracism. Further, these social standards continuously evolve, becoming increasingly unattainable—there's always the expectation to be 'manlier' in a man's performance of gender.

as the expectation that men must express manhood in a defined, often violent and aggressive, manner, while devaluing any other forms of male behaviour. From a young age, boys are taught that expressing emotions or showing vulnerability is a sign of weakness. Not only are they perceived as deficiencies, but it is also seen as 'feminine', and therefore emasculating.

In the South Asian context, it's common for young boys to be told not to cry like girls, with phrases like 'larke larkiyon ki tarah rote nahi' ['boys don't cry like girls']. This pressure to 'man up' often causes men to become more emotionally stunted than their female counterparts. The phrase 'mard ko dard nahi hota' ['men don't feel pain'] is frequently heard in Urdu- and Hindi-speaking regions. Men are expected not to exhibit hurt, vulnerability, or weakness. If they do show emotion, it must be laced with aggression or violence. For example, if a man is hurt, he is expected to lash out rather than express pain or shed tears.

Patriarchy, in its attempt to elevate men, places them on a pedestal so high that any deviation from the unrealistic standards of manhood results in societal punishment and ostracism. Further, these social standards continuously evolve, becoming increasingly unattainable—there's always the expectation to be 'manlier' in a man's performance of gender.

While covering the illegal migrant crisis in countries like Pakistan, I learnt that masculinity plays a key role in driving men to embark on treacherous journeys to provide for their families. As you scroll through countless videos on TikTok of young Pakistani boys and men illegally crossing borders and evading both law and death, you'll often see comments praising them as courageous and brave sons of their parents. The immense pressure on men to be the breadwinner in the family has negative implications, particularly for those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. For these men, lacking the resources to provide for their families drives them to risk their lives in search of better employment opportunities abroad. However, with work opportunities for women available, these risks are not necessary—if only patriarchy allowed men to share the burden of supporting the household.

When feminists fight against patriarchy, their goal does not just protect and empower women and other marginalised genders, but also supports men. Patriarchy adversely affects everyone, regardless of where they stand on the gender spectrum. Therefore, it is crucial for men to be allies and work alongside disadvantaged groups to challenge sexist institutions and societal norms for their own benefit, if not the benefit of others. ■

General Santos Fish Port
Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024.

A typical morning scene at General Santos Fish Port in Mindanao, Philippines. Gen San used to be the tuna capital of the Philippines, but due to overfishing, the province has since lost this title.

Patriarchy is Oppressing Men, Too

The emphasis on patriarchy in Bangladesh is leading to increased oppression of men. Sheikh Khairul Alam, a victim of domestic abuse by his wife, founded the Bangladesh Men's Rights Foundation to support male victims. The Domestic Violence Act 2010 only protects women and children, and studies show that many married men suffer domestic abuse but hesitate to report it due to social stigma. Patriarchy is about power and domination, and both men and women can exhibit patriarchal behaviour. All victims of domestic violence should be entitled to legal protection, regardless of gender.

Md. Ibrahim Khalil

Sheikh Khairul Alam is 50 years old. He was often subjected to physical and emotional abuse by his wife. He tried to endure for the sake of the family, but eventually it was too much to cope with. Unable to bear the torture, he approached various human rights organisations and centres who help battered women. But no one agreed to stand by him; the organisations claimed that they work only with women's abuse cases, not on men's. In response, Sheikh Khairul Alam formed the Bangladesh Men's Rights Foundation for overlooked victims like him. Through this organisation, male victims receive legal support in their battles against domestic violence.

Recently, a study by this organisation revealed that almost 80% of married men in Bangladesh are victims of emotional abuse.[1] Many of them do not disclose it for fear of social shame. Human rights activists in Bangladesh also assert that within a marriage, physical abuse against men is not uncommon. According to the Bangladesh Manabadhikar Bastabayan Sangstha (BMBS) database, in 2015, at least 500 men allegedly mistreated by their wives contacted them for advice to continue their family life without harassment from their spouses. BMBS demands legal protection for all victims irrespective of gender.

According to Section 3 of The Domestic Violence Act 2010, domestic violence is defined as 'physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, or economic abuse against a woman or a child of a family by any other person of that family with whom the victim is, or has been, in family relationship'.

From this definition it is clear that the law ignores a man's status as a victim of domestic violence. As the Act overlooks domestic violence against men, it deprives them of seeking legal help in case of domestic abuse. A writ petition was filed with the High Court Division of Bangladesh early in 2024 seeking amendment of Section 375 of the Penal Code, 1860, to replace the word 'woman' with 'person'. But the attempt was unsuccessful.

In the case of domestic harassment of women, there is additional legislation that offers protection such as the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, and provisions of the Penal Code, 1860. But no legal acts protect the rights of male victims of domestic abuse.

According to Engineer Farooq Sajed, General Secretary of Bangladesh Men's Rights Foundation, mental and physical abuse and discrimination against male victims in Bangladesh has now become a prominent social issue. There are organisations which purport to be dedicated to protecting the rights of all in Bangladesh—women, children, the third gender, and even animals. But not men. Men in Bangladesh are now so vulnerable that if a case or complaint is filed against anyone, he will be put behind the bars without any investigation.[2]

Usually, when a woman is oppressed in our society, we blame the patriarchy. Now the question is, what is patriarchy? Does it mean dominating and oppressing women? If that is the case, is matriarchy the opposite of patriarchy? Matriarchy is a system where women play a major role in decision-making in the family. Oppressing or neglecting the men of her family is not a precursor in order to do this. She takes the necessary steps to live peacefully with the household, makes decisions on the basis of mutual understanding.

On the other hand, feminism is a movement. This movement works towards a social system that does not oppress women or men but supports the freedom of women to live their lives based on political rights, respect, power, and equality. In short, neither matriarchy nor feminism aim to oppress or rule over anyone. In both systems, women ask for peace in society, family, and themselves. As a result, the question arises: if men are abused, dominated, or oppressed by women, then what is the name of this? According to modern sociologists such as Dr Abdullah Al Mamun Hussain, Department of Psychiatry, Rajshahi Medical College and Professor Bokhtiar Ahmed, an anthropologist at the University of Rajshahi, it is also a form of patriarchy.

"From this definition [by The Domestic Violence Act 2010] it is clear that the law ignores a man's status as a victim of domestic violence. As the Act overlooks domestic violence against men, it deprives them of seeking legal help in case of domestic abuse. A writ petition was filed with the High Court Division of Bangladesh early in 2024 seeking amendment of Section 375 of the Penal Code, 1860, to replace the word 'woman' with 'person'. But the attempt was unsuccessful."

Patriarchy literally means 'the rule of the father' and comes from the Greek 'patriarkhēs', meaning 'father', and is a compound of 'patria', 'lineage, family, fatherland' and 'domination, authority, sovereignty'. In sociology, 'patriarchy' is used to refer to a social system where men hold a disproportionately large share of social, economic, political, and religious power, and inheritance usually passes down the male line. Several writers in Bangladesh also use the word 'patriarchy' interchangeably with 'oppression' and or the aggressive behaviour of men. Nowadays, patriarchy is often associated with dominating behaviour predicated on the oppression of others, especially women, and this is the form of patriarchy being discussed in this article. A patriarchal man or woman wants to keep all the power for themself—his or her self-centered thinking and disregard for

others' opinions could arguably make him or her an authoritarian.

All over the world, including the Indian subcontinent, men dominate women in many ways. From everyday sexism to violence against women, all sorts of heinous acts occur. Every day we see such reports in the media. Such incidents happen in front of us. As a result, numerous institutions have been formed around the world to support women against patriarchy. The United Nations also has specialised organisations for the protection of women and children. There are dedicated courts in various countries which preside solely over criminal cases regarding violence against women and children. Yet, these institutions are not enough to eradicate violence against women, such is the degree to which the roots of patriarchy are embedded in our society. In addition, or perhaps consequently, there is little protection or support offered to male victims of patriarchy.

Peaceful coexistence between men and women requires compassion, appreciation, respect, and mutual understanding. Within the patriarchal hegemony, we know that most of the time men do not take these things into consideration in the case of women, which leads to marital discord. Usually, men are reluctant to disclose their troubled situation due to the expectations of their masculinity, especially when it involves their wives behaving in a patriarchal manner. Men hide their problems for fear of being humiliated by society and family; how can they maintain their reputation when it is their wives who dominate over them? As the patriarchal social system has a strong presence in Bangladesh, the issue is very sensitive for men. They will silently endure emotional and physical abuse to avoid disgrace. At the same time, women also tend to keep the matter secret to avoid disrespect to family and society—it would not do to have married a weak man.

"Usually, men are reluctant to disclose their troubled situation due to the expectations of their masculinity, especially when it involves their wives behaving in a patriarchal manner. (...) They will silently endure emotional and physical abuse to avoid disgrace. At the same time, women also tend to keep the matter secret to avoid disrespect to family and society—it would not do to have married a weak man."

It is generally believed that men are mostly responsible for divorce in Bangladesh. But in many cases, wives are also to blame for domestic violence and divorce. I interviewed a few men and women to better understand the matter.

Pseudonyms have been used for all accounts as none of the interviewees wanted to be identified. The first interviewee is Mirza, who claims to be very tired of marital strife. He has no doubts about his wife's love for him, but the relationship has its challenges. He is the only son in the family, and his unmarried sister is still living at home. Currently, his father is unemployed; Mirza is the sole breadwinner of the household. His wife wants to separate from the family. But Mirza asks, how can he leave his parents? Where will they go? How can he send his sister away without the means to support herself? This is the main source of tension in the marriage. Consequently, his wife acts out in front of other members of his family. She berates him in various ways on minor issues and leaves the house without telling him, a clear act of defiance and insult in patriarchal Bangladesh. He has tried to come to an understanding on multiple occasions, but she does not want to understand him.

Imran is similarly worn out by domestic discord. He is a government employee with a monthly salary of BDT20,000 and lives in Dhaka, while his wife lives with the family in the village. The main reason for Imran's unrest is the excessive demands of his wife. She wants to buy a new dress every month, and does not want to have any discussion about it. Imran is harassed by her if he is late to fulfill her demand. If he is, she often blocks his mobile number in retaliation. It is difficult for Imran to run a family of six with the little money he makes. He is exhausted with the expenses of the family and the mental torment from his wife. I spoke with Imran's wife Shanta. She said, 'When Imran gives his parents money for expenses, there is no shortage. But there are many excuses to buy something for his wife. None of my

desires were fulfilled in my father's house. What is the value of my married life if my husband can't fulfill my desires?' At one stage, Shanta said, 'I understand he doesn't earn a lot. But sometimes I get very angry with him. Because of this anger, I act out. It's not that I do it intentionally, but I want to make him miss me. Understand me. But when the anger subsides, I remove Imran's number from the block list. I also speak to him normally.'

These are not isolated cases, and the situation will not improve without a change in attitude both socially and legally.

This article is not for or against women or men. No one wants women to be subjected to violence because of patriarchal attitudes. There are various laws for the protection of women, although there is progress to be made. But if a woman commits the same violence towards a man, he does not have the same support, both socially and legally. This needs to change. Everyone should be protected against domestic violence, regardless of their gender. ■

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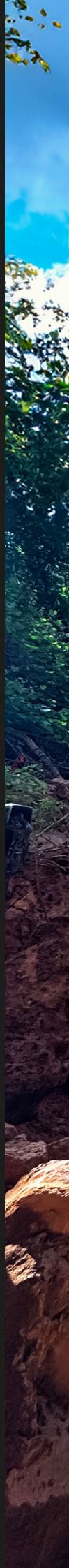
Beyond My Lens

Gopashis Biswas G.Son

> "Social media came to Bangladesh at a time when the country was not quite prepared for comprehending its complex consequences. (...) With its unprecedented immediacy and the breakdown of traditional barriers, social media became a microcosm of larger societal issues."

Witnessing my home country, Bangladesh, once a champion of secularism, succumb to growing polarisation and religious extremism has been a deeply disillusioning experience. The rise of radical political parties and religious nationalism has fuelled an atmosphere of 'othering' and discrimination. The statistics paint a grim picture—the percentage of minority populations has shrunk by nearly half since the nation's independence. A study by Professor Abul Barakat warns of a complete exodus of religious minorities within three decades. This reality sparked in me a deep curiosity to understand the reasons behind the vicious cycle of political-religious polarisation and societal fragmentation, each feeding to the other to grow.

It began with the arrival of social media. Social media came to Bangladesh at a time when the country was not quite prepared for comprehending its complex consequences. Even after two decades of social media presence in the country, 76% of the population are still under the minimum news literacy rate (UNICEF, 2020), which makes the wider population vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. With its unprecedented immediacy and the breakdown of traditional barriers, social media became a microcosm of larger societal issues. The instantaneous accessibility and lack of fact-checking measures on platforms like Facebook and Twitter created a breeding ground for misinformation and hostility towards out-groups. This explosion further exacerbated the existing divisions. Seeing this widespread online negativity firsthand motivated me to understand the roots of social media-driven prejudice.



Towards the end of the Grotto Trail Hike, Zion National Park, Utah. Photography by Gopashis Biswas G.Son, June 2024.

Alone in the vast, Arizona. Photography by Gopashis Biswas G.Son, June 2024.


PHOTOGRAPHY BY KESSON BISWAS
G O
I L L I N I

> "Photography often served as an escape from harsh reality, and I gravitated towards stories in pictures, documenting diverse cultures and the joyous energy of festivals alongside travel adventures. This pursuit of storytelling through my lens also included celebrations of diverse communities."

Fortunately, Dhaka, being the capital, offered a more progressive environment, unlike the rural and suburban parts of Bangladesh. My passion for photojournalism manifested in capturing the vibrant tapestry of life as I roamed around in Dhaka looking to capture the diverse cultures in it. Photography often served as an escape from harsh reality, and I gravitated towards stories in pictures, documenting diverse cultures and the joyous energy of festivals alongside travel adventures. This pursuit of storytelling through my lens also included celebrations of diverse communities. All these factors led me to pursue my postgraduate diploma as an Adenauer Fellow of the KAS Media Programme Asia. The program recognised my potential and provided the tools I needed to refine my practical skills alongside my academic inquiries and delve deeper into the social and political dimensions informing my work. The fellowship, through its wide network of fellow journalists and the organisation itself, was not just about developing technical knowhow, it fostered a desire to explore the political dimensions of news and its impact on the public.

The academic curiosity in me led me to start my PhD in communication at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, one of the top ten programs in the world. My research at UofI dissects the consequences of affective polarisation and the challenges faced by minority communities in the online sphere. Employing a blend of quantitative and computational tools, I strive to leverage critical and theoretical frameworks to illuminate the dynamics of digital news and public discourse in this hyper-polarised online environment.

Like my academic journey, my photographic endeavours have not been limited to documenting festivities and cultures across Bangladesh alone. The passion continued to drive the pursuit abroad, and in one of my recent tours to Utah and Arizona, I explored the breathtaking national parks. The accompanying portfolio showcases glimpses from this American adventure.

My journey is far from over. Today, I stand at a crossroads—a photojournalist with a yearning to understand the complexities of social issues, particularly those faced by minorities. The Adenauer Fellowship was a pivotal turning point, and I hope to use the skills I have developed over my time there to bridge divides, foster empathy, and tell stories that challenge perceptions and inspire change. ■

'Go Illini'—the athletics tagline of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.
Photography by Gopashis Biswas G.Son, December 2023.

Grand Canyon National Park (North Rim), Arizona. Photography by Gopashis Biswas G.Son, June 2024.

G'Son is a Adenauer Fellowship alumni and a PhD student in the Department of Communication at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His research interests traverse through social media, media effects, and political communication. His research dissects the consequences of affective polarisation and the challenges faced by minority communities in the online sphere. Employing a blend of computational and quantitative tools, he leverages critical and theoretical frameworks to illuminate the dynamics of public discourse in the hyper-polarised online environment. Beyond academia, G'Son is an award-winning photographer and his works have been showcased in over 10 countries around the world.

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Snowfall at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.
Photography by Gopashis Biswas G.Son, January 2024.


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From Trash to Triumph: A Filmmaker's Journey

Heuv Nhanh has overcome the challenges of living on a landfill to becoming a filmmaker, using the artform to transform his family's life.

Sreypich Mao

When Heuv Nhanh was 10-years-old, he moved from his hometown Prey Veng to a landfill site in Streung Meanchey in 2000. Despite the detrimental impact on his health, he had no other living options. Heuv Nhanh and his family initially moved to Phnom Penh seeking a better life, but due to a lack of employment opportunities, ended up at the landfill. There, they would trawl through mountains of rubbish in search of discarded plastic bottles to sell to recycling plants.

'Since we are poor, we had to go there and risk our lives for small amounts of food,' he said, adding that he didn't have a proper house to live in at the time.

'My parents made a home by utilising a discarded tent for me to live in. It was unstable,' he said. 'But as my parents started loading up rubbish in that location to sort through, we had to keep moving. So, living there is quite difficult.'

'As we know, there are obvious hygiene concerns when living at a landfill, which is one issue. Another issue is the danger of the many trucks passing by,' he said. Nhanh added that almost 90% of those living in the dump never have a proper meal since they are only able to find discarded snacks or fruits. Along with this, his father, an alcoholic, was regularly abusive toward the family.

'When I was born, all I witnessed was domestic violence in my family. It was a traumatic experience for me,' he said. 'When children see domestic abuse, their brain is more likely to absorb the information. It is easy to believe that it was normal, but it is not.'

His father's behaviour was often compounded by the lack of food and poor living conditions.

'Those few years were tough. I only ate food from the landfill,' he said. 'I had to, to survive.'

Better days begin

One day, he came across Scott Neeson. When children living in landfills meet foreigners, they usually ask for money. But Scott didn't give them money. Instead, he handed out food and candy.

Nhanh frequently saw Scott when he came to the landfill to bring children to Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF). Nhanh, on the other hand, didn't want to go to the organisation.

'I didn't want to leave my parents. Also, our parents warned us not to trust strangers,' he said. 'I was afraid of him.'

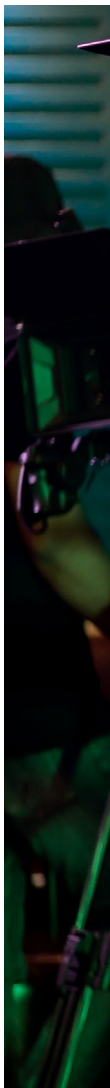
But as Nhanh started to run into Scott more and more, he felt it was safe to confide in him that he wanted to go to school. Eventually, with Scott's help, Nhanh and his sister were able to pursue an education, and moved into accommodation provided by the organisation.

Despite living in the organisation being easier than living in the landfill, Nhanh struggled to adjust to the many regulations.

'When I lived in the dump, I had freedom—I could sleep anytime I wanted, play whenever and wherever I wanted. But the organisation had rules. It had timetables for studying, sleeping, eating, and showering,' he said. 'I didn't want to live there.'

After three days, he wanted to leave. However, the other children persuaded him to stay. He acquiesced, but requested that the organisation let him visit his parents once a week.

While he was in the organisation, his parents continued to live in the landfill. He started visiting



them on Sundays to assist them in sorting through rubbish, as was his habit at the time.

'So, whenever Scott came to the dump on a Sunday, I always did my best to avoid him,' he said. 'I was worried that he would find out and put a stop to my visits.'

Journey to find himself

After graduating from high school in 2014, Nhanh pursued a bachelor's degree in design at Setec University. He had no real plans when he chose his major, he only knew that he enjoyed repairing lights and machinery, but engineering was not an option at the university.

Nonetheless, one day, he was given the opportunity to intern at CCF. He was still living there at the time, and started working as a volunteer in the media unit, making videos and writing scripts for promotional videos. Surprisingly, he found his passion.

'My supervisor asked me to write a script, and I could do it. Frankly, I had no idea what a film was; I started the internship since I didn't have a job,' he said. 'I did some research and discovered that I am more interested in entertainment media.'

Once he discovered his passion, he continued to hone this interest until he got the chance to work on the *Loung Preak Sdach Korn* film as an editor. Working on *Loung Preak Sdach Korn* was a school for him, fuelling his desire to become a director. He felt inspired by the people who surrounded him and wanted to shape himself to be like them. He left CCF, even though the organisation had provided him with almost everything.

'I wanted to be the first person in the organisation to be self-independent. I wanted to face the difficulty on my own. This is my strength,' he said. 'I told the organisation that I wanted to leave as I wanted to improve and accomplish everything on my own.'

After leaving, he worked tirelessly until he became an assistant to Mao Ayuth, a well-known Cambodian director. As his assistant, Nhanh had to work on his language, and communication skills. From him, Nhanh learnt the art of filmmaking.

'He taught me how to be a filmmaker. While on set, I learnt how to lead and manage a team,' he said. 'There were several issues on set, but he [Mao Ayuth] was capable of resolving them all. This is a filmmaker's strength. It's not only about filming the story; we also need to guide the crew.'

Heuv Nhanh on set with his film crew. Photograph by Heuv Nhanh, 2023.

Heuv Nhanh behind the camera as he directs his team on the set of a music video in 2020. Photograph by Heuv Nhanh, 2023.

Despite being in his 70s, Ayuth continued to work until 4am, regularly only getting two hours of sleep before returning to the set. His dedication and enthusiasm for filmmaking motivated Nhanh to do the same.

As he faced several challenges, his position and abilities levelled up. He stated that those who want to transform themselves must start right now.

'If I want to know about the future, I'll look at myself right now. I used to dream about the future, but now I believe that if I want to transform myself, I must begin today,' he said. 'If I am lazy and don't work hard, my future will be the same as I wouldn't have any skills. This is something I always think about.'

One of Nhanh's aims of being a filmmaker is to educate others on the dangers of drinking and how it impacts their health or their children. Many men in Cambodia are addicted to alcohol, much like his father.

'I have no right to order them to stop drinking. But, as a film producer, I can create a film to guide their thinking. Only advertising the video can shift their mindset,' he said. 'It's also legal since we produce educational content. [Cambodian filmmakers have to be careful not to provoke the authorities with the content they produce.] I don't expect things to change completely, but I believe we can make a difference.'

Ambition

Nhanh's dream for his family was to leave the landfill and poverty. When he was in school, he wasn't an outstanding student. But after working on the film, he finally made enough money to build a house for his family.

'My parents used to say that they didn't want to die in a landfill. They wish to return to their hometown,' he said. 'So, I saved money from working on the film until I could build a house for my parents in their

hometown. I could fulfil their wish.'

Apart from that, he wished to help his dad overcome his drinking problem.

'I promised him that if he stops drinking, I will bring him overseas. It was just something I said to motivate him to quit, I just lied to him,' he said. 'But then, I actually got the chance to travel overseas. So, my father began to drink less.'

Nhanh kept his promise, and so did his father. Before, he was afraid of his father when he drank, and dreaded returning home. However, this changed after his father quit drinking. When Nhanh visits home, he feels happy.

'My father has transformed from someone who enjoys drinking and violence to someone I admire,' he said. 'Before, I used to say that I didn't want to be like him. I don't believe that anymore.'

As of 2024, Nhanh has directed two movies due to be released, *The Waiting* and *Yey Mop Village*, further testament to his budding career as a filmmaker. His dream has been realised, but he never wanted to succeed alone while his parents continued to experience difficulties. He had always said that if he were successful, he wanted to help his parents leave the landfill.

'Currently, no one in my family lives in a landfill,' he said. 'They've all got their own jobs.'

Faced with many hurdles in his living and family situation, he often wanted to give up, but everyone around him motivates him to continue. For instance, it was tough during the COVID-19 pandemic, but in context, he was not the only one who suffered, he said.

'It is not only myself, but everyone on the globe. I have been through many challenges in my life, and I have overcome them. This serves as motivation for me,' he said. 'I also know that I'm the only one who can change my life and help my family.' ■

This article first appeared in *Kiripost*.

The Tenderness in Men

The idea of masculinity needs to evolve if we are to build a more equal society for all genders.

Prateebha Tuladhar

Contributor profile on page 54 | The Decade of Women.

If you grew up under the influence of Bollywood films, it is likely they shaped your idea of masculinity. One fuelled by the portrayal of the man as the protector, the creator, and the embodiment of strength and fury.

Growing up in a middle-class South Asian family, the media access I was given was chosen by the men in the family—they were in charge of the VCR and the remote control. Men had more knowledge of technology than women did because of their access to wealth, education, public spaces, and thereby, technology itself!

The selection of films that were brought home were mostly masculine. (Visiting cinemas was not common for the middle-class in those days.) There were many mainstream Bollywood films, but there were also Hollywood entries about boxing rings, war planes, and gadgets, and love triangles. And they were films primarily produced and directed by men.

Looking back, there is a pattern that stands out. Men were mostly angry even when in love, and eager to break or to be broken in order to protect who they loved. Women were either vamps and villains, or they were coy, demure beings, subject to rape more often than not. Such scenes of sexual violence were not censored for children. And there were suggestive bedroom scenes, where hands came together in a clasp and you wondered as a child what it meant when a man and a woman strung their fingers together against the bedside table or the headboard. There was no sanitised version of the world for five-year-olds in 1980s South Asia.

The impressions one collected from the cinema was that women need protection and men are either rapists and killers, or breadwinners and protectors. This impression was partly derived from the society around us, but also fed back to it so that the men in the audience learn to emulate those traits. A full circle.

Even when in love, it was expected of men to pursue women in the most unbecoming ways. Public confrontations and suggestive remarks bordering on harassment were acceptable. If a man wanted a woman, he would follow and corner her, and the woman would be forced to cave in. This would end in marriage. Essentially, it legitimised marrying a stalker/rapist.

From that terribly long lead spanning across several paragraphs, I will briefly make a case for the men in my family, who tried to reject what we saw on screen. My grandfather passed away last year, but all the years of his active life, here's what I witnessed: He would make tea and toast for my grandmother and himself in the morning, and brunch (usually daal-bhat, a Nepali dish consisting of rice, lentil soup, and vegetables) and then walk several miles to his office

That's the kind of men we want to love. Men who push against the idea of masculinity that has been thrust upon us for generations. Men who break free of the mould of expected appearance and behaviour needed to validate their gender.

Characters we meet on screen go a long way in shaping our ideals and perspectives. The representations of men who dash the traditional idea of masculinity, and are comfortable in who they are and can be, go a long way to shape a better world.

at a hydropower station, while my grandmother attended her hospital duties as a nurse. Back home in the evening, he would play his sitar and they would cook dinner together, eat together, drink together. Looking back, I marvel at the simplicity of it all.

My father, probably inspired by my grandfather, wakes the house up gently every morning with the sound of the kettle coming to boil and omelettes gently sizzling in a pan. My mother cooks lunch, and we all take turns cooking dinner. On many occasions, my friends have been surprised at seeing my father in the kitchen. This is not the norm in South Asia. The message my father sends out, therefore, especially to my male friends who frequent our home, is a clear one: household work is shared among the family, even the men.

Recently, a family friend invited me over for lunch. That day, he was the cook and the cleaner and he set before me a perfectly-delectable meal. He is one of the friends who grew up watching my father cook for the family.

With what was a scattered nut graph, I shall now return to the matter at hand—the media. There were gods on TV when I was growing up, and the endless family drama that represented life in South Asia in glamorised forms. Women were told to be good, and men were told to take control. TV was an apparatus to impose a certain kind of understanding of nationalism, society, and culture.

By the time we moved past the Civil War, Nepal had opened up to the world of films beyond Hollywood and Bollywood and the Pakistani and Japanese TV serials donated by their governments. Korean films had arrived.

Right now, there's a world open before us through cinemas from across the globe. And interestingly, Korean drama is one of the most popularly streamed genres. The youth take cues from them for fashion and lifestyle as well as relationships. While men who protect women are a vital part of Korean drama, the women portrayed are also more visible and vocal. They are often seen standing up to men, even getting physical with them on occasion and often rising above their male peers in the workplace.

But what also catches one's eye is the metrosexual look that the male leads carry with such ease in Korean shows. It has made a softer aesthetic more appealing for many Asian men, who feel represented on screen. It has become possible for men to be pretty and feminine, to reject the hyper-masculine ethos.

I'm fascinated by the portrayal of men who cry unabashedly, who express love and sadness, who break down, but also care for the women in their lives. In all of this, the line between genders blur in a surprisingly seamless way. And that's the kind of men we want to love. Men who push against the idea of masculinity that has been thrust upon us for generations. Men who break free of the mould of expected appearance and behaviour needed to validate their gender.

The scene of seduction of Ser Criston Cole by Rhaenyra in the HBO series *House of the Dragon* comes to mind. In the episode written by Ira Parker and directed by Clare Kilner, the portrayal of Cole is one of a man of honour and strength, but there is no dearth of tenderness. In the scene of seduction, there is no sexualisation or objectification of the woman, which points to the difference in gaze. The female gaze views the man not as being a representation of aggression or purely a sex object, but as someone who has compassion and kindness and is therefore, desirable. This is in stark contrast to the male-directed films discussed above, where the male gaze highlighted violence as the height of masculinity.

Characters we meet on screen go a long way in shaping our ideals and perspectives. The representations of men who dash the traditional idea of masculinity, and are comfortable in who they are and can be, go a long way to shape a better world.

There need not be categories to slot men into, as long as we move forward from aggression as a sign of masculinity and cease to perceive softness and kindness as a sign of being 'unmanly'. Let men endorse that love is fluid and not bound by the expectations of gender. Let men live free of the burden to carry themselves a certain way, except with the tenderness each one of them brings forth into this world. ■

Surviving Adversity to Shine in Hollywood

Cambodian-American D.Y. Sao shares his incredible journey from a martial arts fan living in a refugee camp to a Hollywood stuntman, coaching a string of celebrities—including Oscar-winning Michelle Yeoh—and now producing his own Cambodian-based martial arts film.

Sreypich Mao

This article first appeared in *Kiripost*.

As a child, Cambodian-American D.Y. Sao was determined to train in martial arts, hoping to protect himself and his loved ones in the refugee camp they were living in. Amazingly, this interest led him on a path to Hollywood.

Sao's family relocated to the United States to escape the war in Cambodia when he was two years old. When he was seven, he became interested in martial arts and began to practise whenever he could.

'As a little boy, I really wanted to learn martial arts just to protect myself,' he said. 'So, I asked my dad to show me some moves. He didn't know much. He just knew a bit about Kun Khmer and showed me whatever he could. It was only a few movements, including punching, kicking, and elbowing.'

Back then, people in the refugee camp were more concerned with survival than learning martial arts, the Cambodian-American born in Battambang recalled. But Sao believed self-defence was important.

'I think as a man, you have to be physically able to protect the people you care about,' he said. 'What if something happens to your child? How are you going to protect them?'

He finds that training in martial arts makes people stronger, both physically and mentally, and adds to a healthy lifestyle through regular exercise. Moreover, training can help make people more emphatic.

'Everyone should learn a martial art,' Sao said. 'Man or woman, it doesn't matter. It will make you a better person.'

There is no questioning his determination. Even though there was no Kun Khmer coach in America at the time, Sao was able to study the martial art through YouTube and Facebook. The experts were happy to share their skills with him and recommend movies featuring certain styles he could emulate. Sao expressed that he considered himself lucky, and Cambodian support has given him motivation to keep training and spread the Cambodian name.

'I learnt as much as I can,' the 43-year-old said. 'I've been practising martial arts for 37 years now, so I've learnt and enjoyed a lot of different styles.'

Journey to Hollywood

Sao's journey to Hollywood began when he was in his 20s.

'When I was 27-years-old, I decided to go into the film industry. I wasn't able to get any acting roles, but many productions wanted me for my martial arts experience,' he said. 'So, I started as a stuntman. I was fighting and wearing a mask.'

Having mastered various types of martial arts, Sao did not struggle to find work in Hollywood, where his familiarity with multiple forms of martial arts is an advantage. Besides that, he believes he can represent different styles of martial arts since he has a talent in designing his own fighting style and directing his own action sequences. This made him stand out in the industry.

'When you work in Hollywood, you can't just know one style. They mix styles,' he said. 'We cannot discriminate; we have to know every style, including Cambodian, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean.'

With his expertise, Sao managed to climb the career ladder, going from a stuntman to stunt coordinator. He became a well-known martial arts coach to renowned actors, with students such as Simu Liu, Jamie Lee Curtis, Ke Huy Quan, and Michelle Yeoh.

Sao was not easily intimidated when coaching Hollywood actors and treated them as his students. However, he admitted to being nervous when meeting Michelle Yeoh.

The Malaysian actor recently made international headlines when she became the first Asian to win the Best Actress award at the 2023 Academy Awards for her role in the comedy-drama, *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, in which she collaborated with Sao.

'When I was a kid, I was surrounded by kung fu shows. I learnt martial arts from watching her in

Cambodian-American D.Y. Sao regularly practises his martial arts movement such as Kun Khmer at his home in the United States. Photograph courtesy of D.Y. Sao, 2023.

Cambodian-American D.Y. Sao hopes to inspire young Cambodians to achieve their dreams, as he continues to pursue his. Photograph courtesy of D.Y. Sao, 2023.

movies, and now I had to teach her. So, it was a little bit weird,' he said. 'But it only took a little bit of time, and I treated her like my other students. I'm respectful of my students.'

Starring role

Despite his success, Sao yearned to do more than stunt work. At some point, he will age and his physical abilities will deteriorate. He wanted to venture into acting.

'I have had great opportunities as a stunt coordinator. Coaching Michelle Yeoh is good, but if I do that forever, the audience will never know the Cambodian name,' he said. 'I have to be in front of the camera if I want the world to know about my country.'

But as Sao explains, in America, there are little opportunities for someone like him to be on camera. However, things are changing.

'Before, there were only a few Asian actors in Hollywood,' he said, noting recent years have seen more Asian representation in mainstream American movies. 'So, I'm very lucky that America now wants me to be a hero,' he said. 'I think they only want me because I can do martial arts.'

In early 2023, the martial arts movie *Shadow Master*, which features Sao in the main role of An Voaen, hit cinemas in Cambodia.

Currently, he is focussing on acting rather than coaching as he believes it will benefit his country. However, Sao knows he will need time to adjust to acting, much as he did martial arts, which took him 10 to 15 years to master.

'Acting might take a long time, but at the end of the day, if I want to do something important for my country, I have to do it,' he said. 'So, I take it a little bit at a time.'

He also hopes to inspire a younger generation of Cambodians to follow in his footsteps. 'I will just take it a little bit higher and the next generation will carry it on,' said Sao.

A personal triumph

In addition to his success as a stunt coordinator and his acting aspirations, Sao is also turning his attention to directing and producing. Sao plans to shoot his own martial art film in Cambodia next year. The film will focus on Bokator to introduce the world to Cambodia and its treasured ancient martial art.

With this project, he aims to raise the bar for the Cambodian film industry by filming, producing, and editing the movie to the high standards of American films. He is collaborating with a Cambodian-American producer to make the film.

The ambition of making a film for Cambodia has been a long-held desire for him and his producer. They have been waiting for decades for it to become a reality.

'My goal to make a film in Cambodia started 15 years ago when I decided to go into film, at the same time that I started my career in stunts,' he said. 'But [my friend] has been wanting to do this since he was six-years-old. So, he's been patient for 40 years.'

Sao acknowledges that his dream of becoming a successful director will take time. He needs to develop himself and study the skill first. He understands how hard it is to direct a film and holds huge respect for those who can.

He credits directors he has worked with for teaching by example.

'I want to learn from a great director,' he said. '*Everything Everywhere All at Once* had two directors. They are the best directors that I have ever worked with. Even though they are introverted, they came out of their shells to be good leaders and instruct people how to act,' he said.

'Right now, I have a lot of plans already, such as performing, directing the actions, and then acting and pulling it off. [Directing] something I believe I can do, but it will take time,' Sao noted. 'Maybe it will be 10 to 20 years until I can reach those levels.'

Still, he is hopeful that his film will pave the way for more success and learning opportunities for himself. After a long wait, his dream of bringing out a best-selling film for Cambodia is about to become a reality.

'We are almost there and we are very excited. It's the perfect time because of the Cambodian spirit. Everyone is very supportive right now,' he said. 'We promise, the world will know about Bokator.'

> "I have had great opportunities as a stunt coordinator. Coaching Michelle Yeoh is good, but if I do that forever, the audience will never know the Cambodian name. (...) I have to be in front of the camera if I want the world to know about my country."
>
> **D.Y. SAO**
> Martial Arts Expert / Stunt Coordinator and Actor

Sao and his partner are sparing no expense, even though the film is not on the scale of Hollywood blockbusters. For example, the timeframe will be longer than previous films shot in Cambodia—rather than taking nine days for shooting, as is the average in Cambodian productions, they plan to take one month. With this and other extensive preparations, Sao believes that his team will be able to create one of the best martial arts films, showcasing iconic Cambodian monuments, such as Angkor Wat, to the rest of the world.

'We bring the best things from Hollywood to Cambodia, a country that is so beautiful and has a lot of aesthetic value, including the countryside and culture. But the world has not seen it yet,' he said. 'From my perspective, it's not just for Cambodia. It's for the world to come and enjoy what Cambodia has to offer.'

He hopes that once the film is released, people will see Cambodia as a good action film landscape.

'No one else will be able to make a film like this, because I'm bringing Cambodia and Hollywood together. That's basically what I am,' he said. 'I've journeyed from Cambodia to Hollywood and back to Cambodia, and I'm so excited to share my country with the world.' ■

Mindoro Oil Spill Children

Children posing for a photograph while standing on a breakwater at Pola, Mindoro during the anniversary of the Mindoro oil spill on 28 February 2023. An oil tanker spilt 800,000 litres of industrial oil in the protected waters of Verde Island Passage, South of Manila, Philippines. Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024.

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