Introduction:
Women and Gender Politics in Asia and the Pacific[1]

Linda Bennett and Petra Mahy

1. Many of the papers in this issue of Intersections were originally presented at the Tenth Women in Asia Conference, held at the Australian National University, Canberra from 29 September to 1 October 2010. Kumiko Kawashima’s conference report, 'Crisis, Agency and Change,' was published in Issue 25.

2. In the panel on 'Gender, Reproduction and Sexuality in Asia,' the presenters examined the complex ways in which hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality are embedded in various socio-cultural institutions and reproductive and sexual health discourses in Asian societies. The full panel included papers exploring gender and sexuality dynamics and reproductive health in Burma, Cambodia, India and Indonesia. The sub-selection of papers included in this special edition are focused more pointedly on Muslim societies in Asia and feature recently married Muslim couples in the slums of Kolkata, married Sasak couples from Eastern Indonesia, and married Indonesian couples seeking fertility care. Gender analysis is central in all of these papers, as is the commitment to revealing how women are variously positioned within patriarchal institutions. An important feature of all three articles is also the inclusion of men and their roles and status in relationships with women. Each of the three articles is grounded in extensive qualitative fieldwork within the countries featured, resulting in significant insights about how culturally specific constructions of gender and sexuality situate Asian women.

3. Kabita Chakraborty’s article, 'Young Married Muslim Couples Negotiating their Sexual Lives in the Urban Slums of Kolkata, India,' explores how inadequate reproductive/sex education impacts upon the intimate lives of young Indian women and men. Chakraborty's paper reviews the limited sources of reproductive and sexual knowledge available to young people in the slums of Kolkata. She then skillfully presents her empirical data to draw out the consequences of local intersections between poor health knowledge, sexual conflict and sexual double standards within marriage. These include unrealistic expectations of men to be the 'experts' in all matters related to sex, including sexual performance and sexual and reproductive health. She also highlights how the active role expected of men as husbands is mirrored by the assumption that young wives will take a passive role in initiating and managing sexual relations. Chakraborty highlights how the cultural perquisites of performing purity, passivity and innocence for women coalesce to ensure their lack of access to critical information about reproductive and sexual health. She identifies how a lack of awareness surrounding women's and men's individual rights within marriage, including the right to consent, creates a marital dynamic more prone to emotional and sexual violence. Her article powerfully demonstrates the ongoing costs for both women and men of inadequate reproductive sex education, and calls for greater investment into comprehensive formal sex education in India.

4. Maria Platt’s article, 'Married Men Behaving Badly: Islam, Gender and Extra Marital Relationships in Eastern Indonesia,' examines the phenomenon of Sasak men's extramarital relationships that are locally referred to as pacaran lagi (lit. to court again) on the Indonesian island of Lombok. The gendered dynamics that emerge from her analysis overlap significantly with Chakraborty's article by revealing how sexual double standards underpin divergent ideals of women's and men's sexual behaviour within marriage. Platt skillfully explores the ways in which local Islam and adat (custom) are appropriated by men in ways that effectively sanction men's extramarital relationships. While her article explores a normative cultural practice that is the privilege of men, her analysis focuses on the experiences of, and impact on, the wives and children of men engaging in extramarital relationships. She documents how men's extramarital courtship often results in considerable emotional injury to their wives, the depletion of household income, and it compromises women's
ability to provide for their children. Her identification of the economic and emotional violence that stems from men's behaviour adds to the dialogue on women's every day experiences of violence that is introduced in Chakraborty's paper. Platt ultimately reveals a profound contradiction in the way in which local Islam is manifested in the realm of gender relations for the Sasak. She demonstrates how local teachings on the practice of polygamy are appropriated to justify men's extramarital affairs, while at the same time those affairs typically contribute to men's failure to meet their core economic and emotional obligations to the family as prescribed by Islam. Platt's work is grounded in extensive ethnographic research in eastern Indonesia, however, other scholars of gender relations and marriage in Indonesia will no doubt identify parallels in sexual double standards within marriage across the archipelago.

5. The final article engaging with this thematic area is 'The Idealisation of Motherhood, Biomedical Fertility Care and Gender Discrimination in Contemporary Indonesia' by Linda Rae Bennett. This piece overlaps with the preceding two articles in its exploration of how sexist stereotypes and narrow gender ideals function to disadvantage women across Indonesia. Specifically, it explores how dominant cultural constructions of women and their reproductive roles manifest in the realm of biomedical fertility treatment. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork with female patients and their male fertility doctors and includes the perspectives of both groups. It explores fertility doctors' attitudes towards infertile Indonesian women, highlighting the gender inequality in clinic practices and treatment guidelines, as well as critiquing the power asymmetry in doctor-patient interactions. Like Chakraborty and Platt's papers, Bennett's work highlights how male sexuality and men's sexual entitlement occupies a privileged position—in this instance in the context of fertility care. Bennett's discussion draws on women's experiences of negotiating fertility treatment to reveal how this gender asymmetry creates recurrent cycles of disadvantage for women with compromised fertility. These disadvantages include: significant social suffering; poor quality of care; compromised treatment outcomes; the exclusion of men from treatment; and failure to acknowledge women's right to informed consent. The article argues that meaningful change in the realm of biomedical fertility care requires the promotion of client-oriented and rights-based approaches that openly challenge narrow gender stereotypes and sexist beliefs about Indonesian women.

6. Two papers that emerged from the panel on prominent women in Asia, analyse media representations of activist women to explore the gendered way they were portrayed and the lingering legacy of the media interest in these women. Petra Mahy's paper, 'Being Kartini: Ceremony and Print Media in the Commemoration of Indonesia's First Feminist,' explores the ways that the annual commemoration of Kartini Day in Indonesia has developed both ceremonial and print media traditions over time. Mahy argues that both of these processes should be considered as integral to the creation of Kartini as national heroine and the construction of ideal modes of femininity through the promotion of a feminised Kartini symbol.

7. Karen Fox's paper, 'Matriarchs, Moderates and Militants: Press Representations of Indigenous Women in Australia and New Zealand,' begins by analysing press representations of prominent Māori leader Dame Whina Cooper who died at the age of ninety-eight in 1994. Cooper was mourned across New Zealand. Her national prominence had developed through her lifetime of struggle for Māori people, and through her visibility as a leader within Māoridom. Particularly from the 1970s, a number of Māori and Aboriginal women became well-known in New Zealand and Australia for their leadership and activism. In her paper, Fox explores some of the print media representations that surrounded these women as they struggled for the welfare and rights of Indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand, and the ways in which they and their work have been remembered. During a time of intense social and political change on both sides of the Tasman, press framings of these prominent women fractured along racialised and gendered lines, with continuing political significance.

8. Other papers focused on film, literature and pop music. Senthurun Raj's paper, 'Igniting Desires: Politicising Queer Female Subjectivities in Fire,' traces the way the film Fire (dir. Deepa Mehta, 1996) and its transnational reception gestures to the complexities of queer intimacy; the historical and geographical contingency of sexuality; and the fraught notion of what it means to be a 'lesbian'. Articulating a queer female subject position in Indian diasporic popular culture is underscored as an epistemological and political challenge. Radha and Sita, the protagonists of the film, explore the possibilities of queer friendship, pleasure and love within the domestic space. In the film, Raj argues, the home is not constructed as an anterior or repressive place, compared to a sexually 'progressive' West. Instead, the 'home' produces new potential for realising queer desire, even if it
is considered to be 'peripheral' to a broader heterosexual political structure. Responding to the
discursive and political problematics of diasporic representation, Raj's paper que(eries the
ethnocentric tropes of public visibility and consumption that are used to understand or define
sexuality for Western audiences. In doing so, he argues that queer diasporic readings of Fire
undermine the assumptions of passivity, tradition and heterosexuality sutured to non-Western
female bodies. However, rather than frame such non-normative desires as a public sexual identity,
as considered 'proper' in the West, Radha and Sita evince the political possibilities for recognising
queer female sexuality that is negotiated within the space of the home.

9. Arya Aiyappan also explores film in India, focusing on the way Hindi cinema is engaged in a
mutually inclusive relation with society, social order and the hierarchies of power. Her paper, 'When
a Rudaali Raises a Bawandar: The Marginalised get a Voice,' closely examines the meaning and
culture of the Dalit discourse in the Hindi movies Rudaali (dir. Kalpana Lajmi) and Bawandar (dir.
Jagmohan Mundhra). Aiyappan probes into the lives of the women characters in an effort to
comprehend the Dalit woman's struggle concurrently as a Dalit and a woman. The paper grapples
with the issue of how the marginalised come to terms with the differential implementation of human
rights in connection with their gendered caste identities.

10. Continuing with the theme of gender, women and India Elen Turner's paper is entitled, 'Empowering
Women? Feminist Responses to Hindutva.' In it she argues that Indian feminists re-evaluated
earlier assumptions in response to the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid and subsequent
communal riots. She asserts that the visible involvement of women in Hindutva politics sparked
fears amongst feminists that the right had co-opted the discourse of women's empowerment. Indian
feminist presses are one mouthpiece of the women's movement turned to by Turner to explore this
issue. She discusses two works by feminist publishers: Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia's Women
and the Hindu Right (1995) and Atreyee Sen's Shiv Sena Women: Violence and Communalism in a
Bombay Slum (2008). Sarkar and Butalia's collection represents the realisation of the limits of
progressive feminism in India, that issues of secularism and nationalism are as important to women
as domestic violence or dowry. Sen's ethnographic study moves beyond reflection and suggests
ways that feminists can deal with the communalisation of women. Both texts question notions of
sisterhood, emancipation and agency, and represent new departures in feminist thinking in
response to Hindutva.

Kazuki,' shifts the focus from India to Japan and from film to literature. She examines the gritty
narratives of the girl protagonists of two works by popular Japanese novelist Sakuraba Kazuki. In A
Lollypop or a Bullet, the girl narrator relates the events that lead to her friend, physically abused by
her father, being eventually murdered. An Unsuitable Job for a Girl has a different girl narrator who,
with her friend both faced with violent male authority figures-commit murder.

12. Viewing Sakuraba as both a 'girl' writer and a murder mystery writer, Fraser articulates the ways in
which her popular, 'light' fiction writes against acts of gendered violence. Firstly, the girl protagonists
negotiate their violent social crises through imaginary worlds and fantasised identities that support
their friendships and sense of agency. Sakuraba's complex devices that overlay meanings, the
transtexual relationships in her works, and her treatment of girl and mystery motifs from the
perspectives of killer, victim and onlooker feed into powerful acts of writing against violence.

13. Phillip Drake's paper, 'Forbidden Love and Productive Friction: Taking Transgression Mainstream in
the Indonesian Pop Song, Cinta Terlarang,' explores the all-girl duo, The Virgin and Cinta Terlarang
(Forbidden Love, 2009). This popular Indonesian song is woven with contradictions, double-
meanings, and ellipses that disallow singular interpretations. Juxtaposed, these multiple
interpretations generate friction that forges space to present radical depictions of desire and sexual
identification for women in Indonesia, at a moment when sexual politics are perceived to be taking
a conservative turn. In addition to facilitating the circulation of these depictions, Drake suggests
that these productive frictions also generate subject positions that allow for the experiencing and
expressing of desire in new ways through Indonesia's mainstream media. By working though the
song, as the song concurrently works through this essay, he identifies several of these moments of
friction, while building off theoretical work that recognises the localised cultural specificities of
sexual desire and identification in spite of and via the ostensibly homogenising (and
homonormative) discourses of globalisation. The productive friction at work in Cinta Terlarang
illustrates the possibility of disseminating liberating and transgressive visions of same-sex desire
while inhabiting structures of normative regulation. This is not to celebrate regulating structures, but rather, as they become a vehicle of subversion, to note their instability.

14. This issue of *Intersections* also contains seven book reviews that focus on issues of gender and or sexuality in India, Indonesia, Burma, Japan, Korea and China.

**Endnote**

[1] This introduction has benefitted enormously by the inclusion of excellent abstracts provided by various authors.