

Interview – Sharon Bong

Written by E-International Relations

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Sharon A. Bong is Professor of Gender Studies at the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Monash University Malaysia. She has authored “Becoming Queer and Religious in Malaysia and Singapore” (2020) and co-edited “Gender and Sexuality Justice in Asia” (2020). She is former consultant to and coordinator of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia, an academic forum of feminist Catholic women theologians in Asia, a forum writer for the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (on ecological ethics, sexual ethics, postcolonial theories and LGBTQ theologies), and a member of the Board of Editors and Board of Directors for Concilium, the international journal for theology. She has facilitated gender-sensitisation workshops on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Bar Council (law students). In 2016, she established the undergraduate area of specialisation in gender studies at Monash University Malaysia and currently serves as the Graduate Research Director for the SASS.

Where do you see the most exciting research or debates happening in your field today?

In my intersectional fields of study – genders, sexualities and religions in a Southeast Asian context – the contemporary challenge is AI, climate change (which permeates all research, I would argue), and intergenerational activists who are engaged in making sense of these challenges.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Academically, these mindset shifts have broadened rather than changed over time, and my research bears witness to these shifts: from dead poets to living narratives; and from women’s rights narratives navigating religions, to narratives on becoming queer and religious, and narratives of faith-based ecofeminists. I identify as a feminist, and I attribute this standpoint to my mum. This feminist theoretical framework has been a constant in my academic journey as well as a passion in engaging with Religious Studies, which is an uncommon pursuit for a Catholic laywoman with very little job prospects at a higher education institution in Malaysia. As a twenty-something-year-old, I was drawn to gender and Religious Studies in my quest to better articulate and channel my anger at the barriers to women’s ordination within the Catholic Church!

In *The Tension Between Women’s Rights and Religions: The Case of Malaysia*, you explore how critical relativism can help navigate tensions between universal women’s rights and culturally specific norms. What does this mean in practice, particularly in the Southeast Asian context?

In my first book, I referred to the narratives of women’s rights activists who navigate the tension between rights and cultural and religious traditions, from a professional (or vocational) and personal perspective. Within the former perspective, organisations like SIS Forum (formerly Sisters in Islam), with whom a couple of interviewees are affiliated, see women’s human rights and Islam as mutually impacting. For example, on the question of donning the hijab, adherence to the universal value of women’s human rights refers to women exercising the right to choose (such as whether to don the hijab or not). Adherence to cultural and/or religious values would enable one to appreciate that the hijab signifies religious piety (rather than oppression) for a woman who chooses to wear the hijab.

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In this book, you also challenge the secular foundations of mainstream human rights discourse. How does this secular bias limit our understanding or implementation of women's rights and sexual health and reproductive rights (SRHR) globally?

This question is connected to the earlier one where you noted the neologism in the book — “critical relativism”. I coined this theoretical concept, which inductively arises from my analysis of the narratives of women's human rights activists, to articulate how they engage with rights and religions in their activism — which, to simplify, is a both-and standpoint rather than an either-or one. I continue to argue — more than two decades later — that it is far more challenging to work at this hyphen. Imposing a rights framework may come across as a less messy (i.e. complicated) approach, but as other studies and best practices have shown, it is far less impactful and effective, given that many important decisions (particularly related to SRHR) are substantively impacted by culture, tradition, norms and religious values (e.g. taboos) that we have inherited and largely left unchallenged.

In your chapter *Women's and Feminist Activism in Southeast Asia*, you describe how feminist activism in the region both spiritualizes politics and politicizes spirituality, particularly in struggles for gender justice. How do activists navigate religion and spirituality in this process, and what tensions do they face, especially when addressing issues like SRHR?

Thank you for noting the catch phrase that I used! Within the feminist movement, gender justice, a later concept and practice, flows from women's human rights, and extends to the reproductive rights, reproductive health, sexual rights and sexual health, and thus the SRHR of LGBTIQ persons. A critical relativist position that spiritualises politics and politicises spirituality among faith-and-rights-based practitioners or activists would view cultures and religions not only as barriers to SRHR (e.g. demonising homosexuality, conducting conversion therapy, justifying corrective rape and surgeries) but also sources of affirmation of gender justice for LGBTIQ persons. The latter is achieved by activists who draw on, for example, queer readings or hermeneutics of holy texts, such as the Qur'an and Bible to offer an alternatively radical acceptance of LGBTIQ persons. The backlash is real, in both online and offline spaces, in the form of hate speech, death and rape threats, and more.

In this chapter, you also highlight how religion not only shapes activism but is also deeply embedded in state policies and legal frameworks across Southeast Asia. How do these state–religion relationships, such as various forms of institutionalized religion, create specific challenges or opportunities for advancing gender justice and SRHR?

This question is related to the main point in the previous question on spiritualising politics and politicising spirituality. With regard to the latter, women's rights activists politicise spirituality when they engage with cultures and religions in advancing SRHR and gender justice for women and girls, gender and sexual minorities, migrants and refugees and other disenfranchised by systemic injustices through multiple axes of discrimination, e.g. ethnicity, caste, religious affiliation, nationality, class, (dis)abilities, etc. Many systemic injustices are state-driven, and a potential ripple effect of faith-and-rights-based activism would be to spiritualise politics (yes, we can be idealistic!) in engendering political will among decision-makers in political, legal and religious institutions that, to a large extent, are already obligated by states' ratification of UN conventions like CEDAW. Barriers take the form of the assumption of a heteronormative citizenry that is further enforced by legal instruments (that criminalise certain sexual practices) and biased interpretations of religious texts that uphold the deviancy of other-than-heteronormative subjectivities and practices. Opportunities for a breakthrough take the form of stakeholders willing to be open to meeting each other in finding a common ground, for instance by making compulsory and extending the period of basic education for girls before they are married off to reduce instances of child marriage.

What lessons can transnational feminist movements learn from Southeast Asian feminist activism, especially in navigating postcolonial, religious, and pluralistic societies?

The answer is embedded in your question: decolonising hegemonic discourses that maintain hard divisions and binaries (e.g. male/female, ethnic majority/other, citizens/alien, rich/poor, heteronormative/non-heteronormative, etc.) becomes a political and moral imperative in social-political and cultural milieu that are plural and therefore diverse.

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The challenge is how to manage such diversity whilst incorporating an ethics of care and respect for such diversity and differences that matter in an inclusive manner. SEA feminist activism also learns best practices from transnational feminist movements that are based on the value of universal values such as women's human rights and sexuality rights. SEA feminist activists insist, of course, that these universal values are meaningfully contextualised. The partnership among feminists as equals (in effect, the landscape of activism is not a level-playing field), the knowledge-building (from a feminist epistemological standpoint) that recognises the legitimacy of contextualised lessons from the field, and the integrity of lived experiences, are integral in meeting contemporary challenges in a world that is increasingly divisive and fractured as well as alienated from the ecosystem.

In *Becoming Queer and Religious in Malaysia and Singapore*, you give voice to queer faith-based narratives. What do these stories reveal about resistance and belonging that mainstream LGBTQ+ activism might overlook?

Whilst recognising that mainstream LGBTQ+ activism is not monolithic or singular in approach, a key takeaway from my second book would be to not dismiss queer narratives of belonging that arise from a place of conflicted positionalities among LGBTQ+ persons. The continuum of resistance and compliance (e.g. passing as straight), the on-going quest for spaces of belonging in conservative nation-states (that draws on the nexus of closeting and coming out), is a complex one. Becoming an ally necessitates courage and compassion in journeying with LGBTQ+ persons in all of their diversities and differences. At the risk of essentialising, it is about according legitimacy to the 'Asianness' in Asian queerness.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Follow your heart in your pursuits and life decisions. Your question transports me to my job interview at Monash 22 years ago as a fresh PhD grad where I spoke on the 'road less travelled' (inspired by Robert Frost's poem, since I was a student of Literature in my undergraduate studies). Working on the intersection of rights and religions, which I am still passionate about (now extended to a current research project on climate justice and gender justice from a faith-based perspective), was a pursuit that was highly uncommon, even odd. However, staying the course and following my heart has led me to opportunities that I did not yet imagine back then.