

*Social Movements for Gender and Sexual Diversity: Case Studies from Jamaica, Nepal, and Japan*

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What do Jamaica, Nepal, and Japan have in common? This isn't a trick question, despite the seeming randomness of linking these three countries together. Over the last six years I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork in each country, researching social movements for gender equality and sexual citizenship. I have learned that movements in each country are rooted in feminist/decolonial, and human rights theory and praxis. As a scholar-activist of gender and sexual diversity cross-culturally, I conduct research by collaborating with social movement activists. I have been fascinated to learn that the movements in these countries are both unique and similar, their uniqueness stemming from specific cultural and historical contexts, their similarities from the powerful influences of over half a century of international human rights discourse. This overview of my research is also a tale of the feminist political economy of academic labor, *my labor*, and how my travels to these places is intertwined with my positionality as a feminist anthropologist and a Jewish single mother of a teenaged daughter, inspired by *tikkun olam*, the Jewish moral call to repair the world through social justice action.

In 2016, I produced and co-directed a documentary about the second Jamaican Pride celebration, titled *Many Loves, One Heart: Stories of Courage and Resilience*. My daughter was 14, away at overnight camp, allowing me to travel with a film crew for a month of intensive filming in Kingston, having laid the groundwork with over two decades of Jamaican fieldwork. We arrived as organizing for Pride 2016 was underway and began filming immediately.

Pride Celebrations in Jamaica began in 2015 in Emancipation Park in New Kingston, with a brief flash mob of LGBT activists, an exhibition of rainbow colors, and international celebrity support. Since then, a more organized set of week-long activities has become an established part of the LGBT movement's strategy for challenging the heteronormativity of

Jamaican society while validating LGBT lives. Planned and coordinated by J-FLAG, the Jamaica Forum for All-Sexuals and Gays and their sister organization, WE-Change, their strategies for Pride are both local and international, drawing from a history of Pride parades affirming the universal human right to sexual citizenship. Equally critical is the quintessentially Jamaican character of the festivities, highlighting central values and practices of Jamaican culture. While the range of activities encompassing Pride has varied somewhat from 2016 to the present, they all include events that many Jamaicans recognize as familiar. These include sports day competitions; a family discussion night; a party featuring a stage show; a beach day outing; and community service for the homeless and hungry. Pride week distills the broader objectives of Jamaica's LGBT activists and their social movement that seeks to transform the island into a space of inclusivity where all persons can love freely without risking their lives. Brilliantly coinciding with Emancipation and Independence celebrations that center historical struggles for freedom and human rights as *Jamaican* struggles, not imports of western elites, LGBT activists stage these events asserting a centerpiece of their movement: "We are Jamaicans" highlighting the hypocrisy of celebrating emancipation from slavery and British colonialism while retaining colonial laws about "buggery" and denying sexually diverse citizens their rights, enshrined in the multiple human rights instruments Jamaica has ratified.

Academic article writing—different from the grant writing that funded my fieldwork—demands large blocks of uninterrupted, alone, quiet time and space to perform the scholarly labor of deep thinking, reading, and, in the case of fieldwork, transcribing interviews and fieldnotes. In the four years since we completed the documentary, the "room of one's own" that Virginia Woolf famously characterized in 1929 as the elusive time/space women need for deep writing, has remained just that—elusive—except for what you are reading here.

Moreover, the selection of travel, first to Nepal in 2019 for my sabbatical and then in 2020 for on a Fulbright Specialist grant to Tokyo, was inspired and made possible by relationships with colleagues and friends, relationships that allowed me to unite pursuits of career and family obligations interpellating feminist consciousness. In a nutshell, returning from Jamaica, I fortuitously met Nepali artists and scholars at various gatherings of friends and colleagues, leading to multiple invitations to travel to Nepal. At my university I teach an Anthropology of Art course that includes a unit on activist art; learning of the burgeoning role of women artists in South Asia, I accepted these invitations, arranging for my daughter to stay with her father. Knowing that I could introduce the research into course content was an important part of my sabbatical application, even if scholarly writing time would be in short supply. After securing funding, I introduced myself via email and Skype to some women social and political artists, raising consciousness through their art about their rights enshrined in the 2015 Constitution. Being both a woman and a career-artist is two generations new in Nepal. Historically, formal

painting, sculpture, and metalwork were the purview of the Newar caste of Chitrakar men of the Kathmandu Valley, their focus religiously themed commissioned art (Thapa, 2017). Since the 2006-end of the bloody, decade-long Maoist-led civil war, however, both formally educated women artists in Kathmandu and women trained in Mithila folk art from Janakpur in southern Nepal, are challenging pervasive, de facto inequalities: menstrual taboos, child marriage, sexual violence, gender literacy gaps, caste discrimination. Their art critiques social, political, religious, and economic hierarchies entrenching discrimination and limiting opportunities, for women, Dalits and other marginalized groups. Artists draw on the historical, aesthetic, and thematic traditions of Hindu and Buddhist mythology and Indigenous design, blending them with modernism, abstraction, surrealism, and realism. By using the power of art to connect individuals empathetically to Nepali social structural inequality, they strive to usher in a new era of liberation that eradicates oppression without destroying the aesthetic beauty and skills of Nepal's art history. They also critique the idea of art solely as beauty.

I met artists in cafes, galleries, and studios learning about their messages and the art forms that portray them. Ragini Upadhyay Grela, the first woman Commissioner of the Arts in Nepal played a significant role in creating art with political and social themes, critiquing patriarchy and environmental degradation through, for instance, figurative paintings of powerful, didactic goddesses condemning government corruption (Chitrakar and Ellias 2015). Self-named Artist (art + activism) Ashmina Ranjit (2018) pioneers courageous, dramatic performance pieces foregrounding violence against women and menstrual taboos as does Sheelasha Rajbhandari who co-founded the arts cooperative, Artree Nepal in 2013 with her artist husband Hit Man Gurung—their self-chosen, out of caste marriage itself a radical act.

Leaving Kathmandu, I traveled with prominent Mithila artist, Ajit Sah to his hometown of Janakpur where, as an ally for women's equality, he trains widowed, poor, Dalit women in Mithila art as a source of self-dignity and livelihoods. I interviewed the women, with the help of a translator, about how their art impacts their well-being, their self-concepts as women, and their understanding of the value of Mithila art in the community and for the nation. On their own initiative, they began critiquing social inequalities, painting scenes of empowered girls going to school rejecting forced, early marriages.

During these years, my Ashkenazi Jewish-African American daughter was developing an interest in the dynamics of race and ethnicity between Japan and Korea as part of her high school senior research project. Inspired by her own overlapping identities, she sought to explore how race and ethnicity were constructed in Japan while studying Japanese with a tutor on the side. Seeking to help my daughter further her interests, I linked motherhood and research, traveling with her on a Fulbright Specialist grant in December 2019 to Tokyo Gakugei University where she attended an international high school. I taught feminist research methodologies

to graduate students, conducted a joint study with Physical Education Professor, Suzuki Naoki on gender roles in Japanese PE classes, and did a content analysis of gender and sexual diversity in national middle school health textbooks. I learned about the revival of the Japanese women's movement, *ūman libu*, women's liberation of the 1970s when women embraced the idea of feminism, seeking to define and achieve their political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights. Inspired by international women's rights, LGBTQ movements, and everyday experiences of discrimination these movements express both cultural particularities and universal human rights.

Worldwide, gender bias in textbooks reinforce traditional gender roles, male dominance, and heteronormativity. In Japan, research reveals a similar pattern of underlying discrimination through messages of gender and sexual bias in a hidden curriculum (Lee, 2014). An effort to address these biases in textbooks was undertaken in 2018 and published in 2020 in the National Elementary School Health textbooks and curriculum. Suzuki and I contribute to this ongoing work analyzing gender messages and outlining still-needed reforms. We employed mixed methods including content analysis of textbook illustrations and observations of PE and health classrooms in middle and high schools in Tokyo and beyond. Current reforms include explicit attempts to show boys and men engaged in domestic work, equal numbers of illustrations of males and females, and gender neutrality with respect to occupations, clothing, and body language. These images remain largely aspirational rather than reflective of actual conditions. While gender roles are portrayed with increasing diversity, transgender images are absent: there is much work to be done portraying and explaining the full panorama of human gender and sexual diversity. Calls to do so emanate from increasingly vocal revived feminist and queer movements, harnessing the language and moral force of international human rights.

Social movements for gender and sexual equality in Jamaica, Nepal, and Japan exhibit culturally specificity yet are linked through the internationally saliency of human rights.

## References

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