

Book Review

Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law

Ratan Sarkar

Department of Education, Tezpur University

Author Note

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the editors of *Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law* for their commitment to advancing intersectional disability studies, and to Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, for making this important work accessible to a wide scholarly and activist readership. The author also thanks the editorial team of the journal for their kind consideration of this review, and gratefully acknowledges colleagues and peers who offered valuable suggestions and constructive feedback that enriched and supported the completion of this work. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this book review.

Abstract

This review essay critically examines *Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law* (Zhang et al., 2024), a groundbreaking volume that repositions Asia as a vital site of disability scholarship and activism. Framed by intersectionality, the book explores how disability intersects with gender and sexuality across contexts in Vietnam, China, Nepal, Myanmar, and Japan. Through participatory methodologies, it highlights stigma, exclusion, and violence, while also foregrounding agency, pride, and collective resistance. Strengths lie in its empirical depth, activist engagement, and interdisciplinary approach; limitations include its restricted geographical scope and limited theorization of policy implementation. Overall, the volume makes a significant contribution to disability justice, advancing scholarship, policy reflection, and activist practice in the Global South.

Keywords: Disability, Intersectionality, Gender, Sexuality, Human Rights

Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law

Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law, edited by Wanhong Zhang, Elisabeth Perioli Bjørnstøl, Peng Ding, Wei Gao, Hanxu Liu, and Yijun Liu (2024) is a pioneering volume that foregrounds the intersection of disability, sexuality, and gender within Asian contexts, framing these questions within the architecture of international human rights law. Drawing on participatory research and experiential knowledge, the volume contributes to the urgent task of understanding how overlapping identities produce cumulative forms of discrimination and how disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) mobilize against them.

From the outset, the editors frame intersectionality as both an analytic and activist tool. They remind readers that “people with disabilities are more than their disabilities and they are a very diverse group, yet they share some common experiences” (p. xvi). The invocation of Crenshaw’s foundational notion of intersectionality is not merely rhetorical; rather, it is operationalized across empirical case studies from China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Nepal, and Japan. What is particularly notable is the volume’s insistence that the denial of sexuality and reproductive rights is not peripheral but central to the lived realities of disabled women and LGBTIQ individuals. For instance, one participant in Naoko Kawaguchi’s interviews in Japan remarked, “When human beings are divided into categories such as men and women, I do not feel I belong to these categories. From my perspective, human beings are categorised into men/women/disabled” (p. 103). Such voices underscore the deep entanglement of disability and gender regimes in shaping social exclusion.

Methodologically, the book exemplifies the strength of participatory and rights-based approaches. Studies like the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment’s

research in Vietnam (pp. 1–42) adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture “perceived stigma” and “self-stigma” (p. 6), showing that nearly 43% of participants reported stigma in daily life. Similarly, Sarita Lamichhane’s work in Nepal (pp. 62–74) sheds light on the employment precarity of visually impaired women, illustrating how structural barriers in training and workplace inclusion limit both livelihood and dignity. By embedding disabled people’s voices, the research avoids the trap of objectifying them as “subjects of study” and instead affirms them as co-producers of knowledge. This methodological stance resonates with global scholarship advocating emancipatory disability research (Shakespeare, 2017).

At the thematic level, Part II of the book makes significant contributions by interrogating identity formation. Xu Yue and colleagues’ study of *Minority Voice*, a Chinese social media group, documents how digital platforms can function as counter-publics for disability pride and collective empowerment (pp. 110–119). Their findings echo international debates on digital activism, where marginalized groups use online spaces to reframe stigmatized identities (Ellis & Kent, 2016). Yet the book also avoids technological determinism by emphasizing the ongoing material exclusions that persist even alongside online solidarity. Similarly, Li Xuehui and co-authors’ ethnography of mothers of children with autism in Shanghai (pp. 120–140) expands the discussion by considering caregivers’ invisible labour and identity struggles—an important, though sometimes overlooked, aspect of intersectionality.

Part III—perhaps the most provocative—focuses on sexuality, bodily autonomy, and gender-based violence. Carmen Yau’s chapter on Hand Angels in Taiwan (pp. 143–159) is groundbreaking in its frank discussion of voluntary sex services for disabled people. By situating these practices within the framework of “intimate citizenship,” Yau challenges normative discourses that desexualize disabled bodies. Complementing this, Rama Dhakal’s

testimony from Nepal highlights systemic violations in sexual and reproductive health rights, from coerced sterilizations to lack of access to information (pp. 160–167). The prevalence of gender-based violence is starkly documented, with one survey noting that disabled women frequently remain in abusive relationships due to caregiver dependency and inadequate social services (pp. 187–199). These accounts substantiate earlier global findings that women with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to violence (UN Women, 2020).

Critically, the volume does not shy away from exposing limitations in existing legal frameworks. Although many countries in Asia have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), implementation remains uneven. As the editors note, “statistics on LGBTIQ individuals hardly exist, not to mention on LGBTIQ individuals with disabilities” (p. xviii). The absence of disaggregated data reflects what Delprato and Shephard (2024) term the “missing data problem” in education and rights monitoring, which ultimately hampers accountability. In this regard, the book is as much an indictment of policy inertia as it is a celebration of grassroots resilience.

Yet the book is not without limitations. While its regional focus is commendable, the contributions are uneven in analytical depth. Some chapters, such as Lamichhane’s on Nepal, primarily present descriptive statistics without fully theorizing them in relation to broader feminist or queer disability studies. Similarly, the annex on international instruments (pp. 201–207), though useful as a reference, does little to integrate these frameworks into the empirical discussions. A further concern is that the volume, by emphasizing participatory research, sometimes privileges activist narratives over sustained theoretical engagement, which may leave academic readers seeking deeper conceptual clarity.

Nonetheless, these limitations are outweighed by the book’s originality and moral urgency. It advances a distinctly Asian perspective that disrupts Euro-American dominance in

disability studies. The insistence on contextualizing intersectionality within local socio-legal realities—for example, the taboo on SOGI issues in Myanmar (p. xvii) or the persistence of medicalized discourses in Vietnam (p. 4)—makes the book indispensable for comparative scholarship. Moreover, it offers actionable insights for policy-makers, particularly in demonstrating how DPOs leverage the CRPD to press for change.

In sum, *Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia* is a landmark contribution that bridges scholarship, activism, and policy. It compels readers to confront the multiple marginalizations that occur when disability intersects with gender and sexuality, and it models participatory methodologies that honor the agency of disabled people themselves. For researchers, it provides a rich empirical base; for policy-makers, it highlights glaring gaps in rights protection; and for educators, it offers narratives that can be mobilized for critical pedagogy.

As the editors remind us, “these issues should be talked about more openly, not only in Asia but everywhere” (p. xvii). Future research must build on this momentum by generating longitudinal, cross-country data and by theorizing the intersection of disability and sexuality in ways that are attentive to both global structures and local specificities. The book’s enduring value lies in its capacity to humanize and politicize voices too often silenced, and in doing so, it opens new directions for rights-based, inclusive futures.

References

- Delprato, M., & Shephard, D. D. (2024). *Achieving equitable education: Missing education data and the SDG 4 data regime*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035313839>
- Ellis, K., & Kent, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Disability and Social Media: Global Perspectives (1st ed.)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315577357>
- Shakespeare, T. (2017). *Disability: The Basics (1st ed.)*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315624839>
- UN Women. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls with disabilities*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/03/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-with-disabilities>.



Disability, Sexuality, and Gender in Asia: Intersectionality, Human Rights, and the Law by Ratan Sarkar
<https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/1442> is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) based on a work at <https://rdsjournal.org>.