



**THE HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASIA CONFERENCE
SERIES: SEVENTEEN YEARS OF DIALOGUE
AND COUNTING**





**THE HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASIA
CONFERENCE SERIES:**

**SEVENTEEN YEARS OF DIALOGUE
AND COUNTING**

May 2025

Essex Human Rights Centre
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park, Colchester
CO4 3SQ, United Kingdom

Summary	2
I. The Beginning: From Student Vision to Centre Stage	3
II. Responding to Asia’s Changing Realities	5
II.1 Cross-cutting political challenges.....	5
II.2 Sub-regional approaches	5
II.3 Economic rights, business and development.....	6
II.4 Human rights and the environment, and responses to natural disasters	8
II.5 The role of activism, freedom of expression and civil society.....	9
II.6 The centrality of the rule of law to the protection of human rights	10
II.7 Promoting the human rights of particularly vulnerable groups.....	11
II.8 Indigenous Peoples	13
II.9 Migrants, refugees and displaced persons.....	14
II.10 Conflict, Peacebuilding and accountability.....	15
III. Student Leadership in Action.....	16
IV. Impact and Legacy.....	17
V. Looking Forward	17
VI. Conclusion	17

Summary

The Human Rights in Asia Conference Series, now in its seventeenth year, brings Asian perspectives to the forefront of human rights discourse. Born from the initiative of a small group of postgraduate students in 2008, the series has evolved into a flagship event for the Essex Human Rights Centre, creating a dynamic platform for dialogue between students, scholars, activists and practitioners. Throughout its history, the conference has tackled pressing human rights challenges across Asia—from sectarian violence and environmental disasters to corporate accountability and indigenous peoples’ rights. Its distinctive student-led approach has empowered generations of human rights defenders whilst building a substantial archive of discussions on human rights challenges in Asia. As human rights challenges in Asia continue to evolve, the conference series remains uniquely positioned to shape understanding and practice through its blend of academic rigour, practitioner insights and student leadership.¹

¹ This summary report was prepared by Dr Katya Alkhateeb, Senior Research Officer and Professor Carla Ferstman, Director of the Essex Human Rights Centre. More information about the Human Rights in Asia conference series, including reports from each of the conferences is available on the website of the Human Rights Centre, here: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/centres-and-institutes/human-rights/events/human-rights-in-asia-conference>.

I. The Beginning: From Student Vision to Centre Stage

In 2008, a small group of postgraduate students at the Essex Human Rights Centre identified a critical gap: despite Asia being home to over half of the world's population, human rights discourse and education in the United Kingdom and globally rarely engaged meaningfully with Asian perspectives or experiences. They envisioned a conference that would bridge this gap, bringing Asian voices and experiences to the fore of human rights discussions. This Asia Human Rights Student Group,² with the support of Professor Kevin Boyle, staged the first Human Rights in Asia conference in Spring 2009, entitled *Strengthening Human Rights Protection in the Asia Region: Optimism or Pessimism?* That first conference addressed four themes: philosophical critiques on the 'Asian Values' debate; human rights practices in the Asia region; ASEAN and the prospect for an effective regional protection mechanism; and the role of Asian countries at the international level.

This student initiative has grown into one of the Human Rights Centre's flagship annual events. Now in its seventeenth year, the Human Rights in Asia Conference has created a unique, student-led space where students, scholars, activists, and practitioners come together to examine pressing human rights challenges in Asia.

In addition to the involvement of countless Essex students many of whom are human rights defenders in their home countries, Essex faculty, and academics from other universities, numerous Asian human rights defenders have participated including Khin Ohmar, a Burmese human rights and democracy activist who has been advocating for justice since her involvement in the 1988 pro-democracy protests; Kanak Mani Dixit, a journalist and civil rights activist and editor of the Himal South Asian regional review magazine, and publisher of the Nepali language weekly Himal Khabarpatrika; and Golog Jigme, aka Jigme Gyatso, a Buddhist monk and human rights activist and former Tibetan political prisoner and torture survivor who escaped Tibet and is now part of the Tibet Advocacy Coalition. Also involved were Tin Mar Oo, Medical Doctor and Rohingya Feminist from Myanmar; Rode Wanimbo, Peace Activist from West Papua; Nirmala Rajasingam, South Asia Solidarity Group/ Movement for Peoples' Struggles from Sri Lanka; Abdul Halim Achakzai and Horia Mosadiq, both Afghan human rights defenders; Indonesian human rights lawyer Indria Fernidais; Henry Koh, Malaysia Human Rights Specialist with Fortify Rights; Eri Ishikawa, Chair of the Board of Japan Association for Refugees; Gladson Dungdung, General Secretary of the Jharkhand Human Rights Movement; Kim Young-Il, Executive Director and founder of PSCORE; Takgon Lee, a lawyer with Dongcheon Foundation, Korea focusing on legal advocacy and policy reform for refugees; Syinat Sultanalieva of the NGO 'Labrys' from Kyrgyzstan; Veerawit Tianchainan, Executive Director of The Freedom Story, Thailand; Youngah Kim, Founder and Executive Director of the Migration of Asia Peace (MAP); Mai Thin Yu Mon, Programme Director for the Indigenous Peoples Development Program of Chin Human Rights

² Thank you to the students responsible for initiating the series and organising the 2009 inaugural conference: Abhilasha Risal, Alexandre L E Mueller, Betty Yolanda, Hye-Min Kim, Isa Soemawidjaja, Johanna A Somerville, Moeko Tsujii (from the LLM 08/09 cohort); Haris Azhar, Kiwako Miyamoto, Marte G Jenssen (from the MA in Human Rights 08/09 cohort); and Joo-Young Lee, Shengnan Qui, Yoshiko Shimizu (doctoral candidates). Special thanks also to Professors Kevin Boyle and John Packer, and Dr Sanae Fujita for their crucial support.

Organisation in Myanmar; Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, indigenous leader, founder and Executive Director of Tebtebba Foundation.

Representatives from regional and international human rights organisations have also participated, including from Amnesty International, Article 19, Asia Floor Wage Alliance, Asylum Access, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Equal Rights Trust, Freedom Fund, Indigenous Peoples Rights International, Institute for Human Rights and Business, Interights, the International Bar Association, International Council on Human Rights Policy, International Justice Mission, International Peace Information Service, LEPR, Minority Rights Group International, Plan International, Reprieve, Restless Beings, Save the Children, SupplyESChange.com, Thomson Reuters Foundation, Transparency International, Women's Network for East Japan Disaster, the World Benchmarking Alliance as have government representatives, including from Indonesia, Japan and the United Kingdom and representatives of intergovernmental bodies like the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights and foundations like the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation and Sasakawa Foundation.

Representatives from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have participated. Also, many United Nations Special Rapporteurs have supported the conference series, such as Tomoya Obokata, former Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery; Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, former Special Rapporteur on internally displaced persons; Phoolman Chaudhary, former Asia Expert Member to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII); Surya Subedi and Rhona Smith, both former Special Rapporteurs on Cambodia; Javaid Rehman, former UN Special Rapporteur on Iran and Michel Forst, former Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders.

Dr Sanae Fujita, a fellow at the Human Rights Centre, has become central to the success of the conference series. Her thoughtful guidance allows students to take genuine ownership of the conference while benefiting from her experience. Each year, she supports a new team of postgraduate students, helping them to develop their ideas into themes that speak to contemporary challenges related to human rights protection in Asia.

When the pandemic forced a shift to online delivery in 2020, the conference adapted by shifting to an online format, reaching new audiences while maintaining its commitment to substantive dialogue. It now operates as a hybrid event. Throughout these changes, the conference has remained true to its founding vision: creating space for Asian perspectives in human rights discourse while offering students valuable experience in bringing together diverse voices for meaningful exchange.

As we look back over the trajectory of the Human Rights in Asia conference series, we celebrate not just an event series, but a community of students, scholars, practitioners and advocates who have helped shape understanding of human rights challenges and opportunities across Asia.



University of Essex
Asia Human Rights Student Group
Half Day Conference
2 June 2009
STRENGTHENING HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN THE ASIA REGION:
OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM?
 PROGRAMME:

'WHAT ARE ASIAN VALUES?'
Michael Freeman (Research Professor, Department of Government, University of Essex) &
Responses from Dr.Usha Ramanathan (Visiting Fellow Human Rights Centre)

'HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY IN ASIA: NEPAL, MYANMAR & CHINA'
(Abhilasha Risal, Marte Graff Jenssen, Shengnan Qiu)

'ASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES'
 The prospects for a regional protection mechanism : Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Human Rights
Kevin Boyle (Professor, School of Law, University of Essex)

 The Role of Asian Countries at International Level
Benny Y.P. Siahaan (First Secretary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Indonesia in Geneva)



PICTURES OF PAST CONFERENCES

II. Responding to Asia’s Changing Realities

Over the past seventeen years, the Human Rights in Asia conference series has continually adapted to address the shifting human rights landscape in Asia, balancing critical analysis with a commitment to dialogue and change. Already in the early years, the conference’s commitment to addressing fundamental questions about strengthening human rights protection in a region marked by low treaty ratification rates and lacking robust regional human rights mechanisms was clear.

From foundational discussions on democracy and human rights protection to urgent concerns about displacement, development, and corporate accountability, it has traced the intersection of historical legacies, structural inequalities, and emerging threats. Whether examining the struggles of indigenous communities, the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, or the impact of economic policies, the conference has consistently highlighted the connections between local realities and global frameworks. Its ability to engage diverse voices—from leading scholars and UN experts to frontline activists and affected communities—has cemented its reputation as a vital space for examining Asia’s human rights challenges. As the region faces new pressures, from mass surveillance to environmental crises, the conference’s role in fostering critical, engaged, and forward-looking discourse remains more essential than ever.

II.1 Cross-cutting political challenges

Democracy has been a regular feature of the discussions. The 2010 conference had a panel: *Democracy in Burma?* in which Ayano Kikuchi and Claire Simmons discussed the situation of democracy and the fate of refugees in Burma. The 2015 conference *Democracy and Human Rights in Asia: Progressing or Retreating?* tackled critical issues about democracy’s trajectory in Asia. Amid Hong Kong’s democracy protests, scholars like Professor Michael Freeman moved beyond simplistic East-West dichotomies to examine how economic success shaped political narratives about human rights. Japanese attorney Teppei Ono’s stark testimony about death row inmates’ experiences illustrated how democratic deficits manifested in human terms.

The 2024 conference *Connecting the Dots of Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices* brought critical attention to how historical colonial practices continue to shape contemporary human rights challenges across Asia. Through powerful testimonies from speakers like Rode Wanimbo on West Papua, Ai Abe on Okinawa, and Maira Aisaeva on the Uyghur situation, the conference revealed how colonial legacies manifest in ongoing struggles for self-determination, environmental justice, and cultural survival. The addition of a film screening examining Sri Lanka’s civil war through “Demons in Paradise” further enriched the discussion of how colonial ‘divide and rule’ strategies continue to influence modern conflicts and human rights violations.

II.2 Sub-regional approaches

Discussions have also focussed on sub-regional approaches to human rights protection and developments in different parts of Asia. For instance, among the issues covered in

the 2010 conference, human rights in the Middle East was considered with an emphasis on the Arab Charter on Human Rights. Mervat Rishmawi, an Essex graduate and former Legal Advisor for the Middle East and North Africa region at the International Secretariat of Amnesty International, reviewed the significant political developments that impacted the adoption of the Charter and the continuing challenges to secure human rights in the MENA region.

In 2011, Rafendi Djamin, Chairman of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights explored this emerging human rights mechanism in the ASEAN region. In 2015, Jane Tedjaseputra discussed the work of the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights as well as the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC).

II.3 Economic rights, business and development

Economic rights, business and human rights and the role of development have been constant themes of the conference series.

Business and human rights were important discussions during many of the conferences including 2011, which included a panel on the subject which considered the obligations of transnational corporations, business and investment challenges in Western Asia in light of the Arab Spring and human rights issues affecting the manufacturing sector in China. Vijay Kumar Nagaraj, Executive Director of the International Council on Human Rights Policy, emphasized the importance of human rights and economic policymaking for the purposes of economic and social development in a manner consistent with human rights. Nagaraj observed that international law is increasingly fragmented, resulting in rules of trade, investment, finance, environment, and human rights undermining rather than complementing each other. In his view, legal arguments will not suffice to reconcile these, for the tensions and argument are finally political. What needs to be determined is the fundamental normative basis for coherence. Discrimination against migrant workers in Asia was another aspect of the discussions in the 2011 conference.

This focus on trade and development built on themes already explored in 2010, where participants assessed the international trade and the right to access medicines in Thailand and India, considering in particular the concerns arising from the *Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property* (TRIPS) on access to medicines, which is a significant component of the rights to life and health. Also discussed were issues arising from the work of the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The 2019 conference ***Development and Human Rights - Shadow behind the Light*** further explored the relationship between economic development and human rights in Asia. What Conference Chair Kae Yoshikawa termed “the shadow behind the light” was powerfully illustrated through cases like the Fukushima nuclear disaster, where survivor Mitsuko Sonoda revealed how communities faced radiation exposure far exceeding international standards in the name of progress. The conference brought together an unprecedented panel of three UN Special Rapporteurs alongside

representatives from major institutions like the Japan International Cooperation Agency, demonstrating how development, while important for the realisation of human rights, required careful consideration of its human impacts and appropriate safeguards.

The 2023 conference *Fashion Industry's Human Rights Impact - Behind the Seams* marked an important shift toward examining how global consumption patterns affect workers' rights across Asian manufacturing hubs. UN Special Rapporteur Tomoya Obokata provided a comprehensive framework for understanding various forms of exploitation in the industry. He shared examples of the issues he has seen from his experiences visiting Sri Lanka and elsewhere as a special rapporteur. He noted that according to ILO in 2016, pay gaps are the highest in Pakistan followed by India, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Bangladesh. Migrant workers, workers with disabilities, children and younger persons are usually victims to inequitable pay gaps as companies do not regard them as proper workers. Migrant workers do not complain because they must support their families back home and would face direct and indirect threats of being terminated if they do so. Within the fashion industry, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions are one of the biggest problems that workers face. Workers are exposed to toxic substances that are used for manufacturing garments, and other accidents occur regularly. The pandemic magnified problems faced by workers too. Some had lost their jobs during the lockdown, while others were forced to work longer in crowded spaces without ventilation and access to water or sanitation because the manufacturing industry was regarded essential in the workforce.

Kate Larsen's insights from decades of monitoring factory conditions highlighted the "invisible violations" workers face. Forced labour, modern slavery and most labour violations in a garment supply chain are include workers paying exorbitant fees to secure a job, restrictions on movement, delayed payment of wages, passports and identification papers being held by factories, and threats of violence on workers who wish to act on their basic human right to quit a job with fair notice. Foreign contract workers in Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan and elsewhere are also often made to live in dormitories with poor living conditions, whilst many working in apparel factories in Bangladesh, Cambodia or India continue to not be provided dormitories at all and are only paid enough to live in slums, where they are charged high rents. Driving down pricing to garment suppliers for margins, coupled with poor monitoring of respect for labour and safety rights, has resulted in tragedies such as the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, in which sloppy safety management resulted in the deaths of 1,200 workers in this building of five apparel factories that produced products for more than 30 brands. The incident triggered increased attention to safety issues and respect for worker rights to collective bargain in the sector, as garment workers who tried to unionise and speak up for safety collectively before the tragedy were not listened to.

Arjun Kharel's research on Nepali workers in Jordan's garment sector and examinations of emerging due diligence laws by Anil Yilmaz and Namit Agarwal, the conference succeeded in connecting individual factory-level violations to broader systemic issues.

II.4 Human rights and the environment, and responses to natural disasters

Climate change and the shifting natural environment has had an enormous impact in Asia as it has in other parts of the world. Countries in Asia continue to struggle with responses to climate-induced displacement, the impact of environmental degradation on the right to life and the right to health, and the respect for human rights in the context of responses to natural disasters.

The 2012 conference focused on: ***Natural Disasters and their Impact on Human Rights in Asia***. Discussions focused on the impact of natural disasters on economic, social and cultural rights, their particular impact on vulnerable groups including the elderly, women and girls, and the duty to provide assistance in the aftermath of natural disasters. The role of international humanitarian organisations was considered as was the use of emergency provisions as part of the disaster response and the impact on human rights protections. Presentations considered the response to the 2004 Tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia as well as Japan's response to the triple disasters on 11 March 2011: the earthquake, the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe. Case studies also considered responses to Typhoon Marakot which hit the coast of Taiwan on 7 August 2009 and the phenomenon of flooding in Nepal. Professor Surya Subedi provided an informative and comprehensive analysis of the international law surrounding the duty to intervene whereas Kimiaki Jin, from the Japan International Cooperation Agency, JICA disaster management, UK Office focused on how to develop disaster resilient communities and societies.

Climate-induced displacement was one of the themes of the 2025 conference: ***Beyond Borders: Displacement in Context of Conflict and Climate Crisis in Asia*** with a panel chaired by Zainab Lokhandwala, Assistant Professor in Sustainability and Environmental Law at Essex Law School, with research focused on food sovereignty in India and expert interventions from Margaretha Quina, a Jakarta-based contract attorney for Earthjustice's International Program who has worked on a range of energy and climate cases and policy advocacy, including the Jakarta air pollution case, Ryan Mitra, an expert with a keen focus on internal displacement, climate change, and migration across South Asia and the Pacific, and John Paul Jose, a sustainability professional specialising in Socio-Ecological systems and environmental resilience in a changing climate.

Freedom of movement is recognised and protected under Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, displacement due to climate crises challenges this right. The climate crisis is increasingly emerging as a powerful force driving displacement across Asia. The eight slow-onset effects of climate change, as identified by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), pose long-term threats that can push communities from their homes, either gradually or through cascading impacts that accelerate displacement. Desertification, glacial retreat, rising temperatures, land and forest degradation, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, salinization, and sea level rise are reshaping the environmental landscape of the region. These processes can make vast areas uninhabitable by depleting vital resources such as water, arable land, and food sources, ultimately threatening livelihoods. As communities struggle to adapt, many are forced to relocate in search of survival. Moreover, these slow-

onset changes heighten the risks of sudden extreme weather events like droughts, tsunamis, floods, and storms. When compounded with existing vulnerabilities, such disasters can accelerate displacement, forcing mass migrations both within and across borders. Low-lying coastal nations, densely populated delta regions, and communities reliant on fragile ecosystems are particularly at risk.

In Asia, where many economies and populations depend on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and fisheries, the impacts of climate change are not just environmental but deeply social and economic. The erosion of traditional livelihoods and the loss of habitable land intensify the struggle for resources, leading to heightened competition, instability, and, in some cases, conflict. As a result, climate-induced displacement is not just a future threat—it is an ongoing reality reshaping communities and migration patterns across the continent.

II.5 The role of activism, freedom of expression and civil society

Human rights activism in Asia has been a regular theme of the conference series. The third conference in 2011 devoted a special panel to **freedom of expression and access to information** in memory of the tremendous work of the late Professor Kevin Boyle on the subject. It involved experts from Amnesty International, Article 19 and Interights among others and was held at the Amnesty International Action Centre in London. Alumna Iain Byrne, from Interights, referring to one of Professor Boyle's 2007 articles, emphasised how freedom of expression is not only vital for the development of individuals but is also indispensable for democracy. It is at the core of the human rights discourse. Isabelle Arradon from Amnesty International in her introductory remarks provided a general overview of violations of freedom of expression which are widespread in Asia. She referred to many examples of violations of freedom of expression including attacks against journalists in The Philippines as well as in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, the killing of Indonesian prominent human rights activist Munir bin Thalib, and the arbitrary detention of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. Sejal Parmar from Article 19 explained the growing practice of Internet censorship in countries like China, Vietnam, Burma, Laos, and Pakistan. According to Parmar, the violation of freedom of expression in Asia is also manifested in the practice of religious intolerance.

During the 2015 conference **Democracy and Human Rights in Asia: Progressing or Retreating?** Hazel Galang-Folli from Amnesty International focused on freedom of opinion and expression in the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore and Sanae Fujita discussed freedom of information and expression in Japan. Nalini Elumalai presented a paper on freedom of assembly and expression in the context of elections in Asia, using Malaysia as a case study.

The 2016 conference **Human Rights Defenders - Voices from the Frontline** brought attention to those standing at the forefront of rights protection in Asia. Sir Nigel Rodley provided vital context through his analysis of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, while UN Special Rapporteur Michel Forst highlighted isolation as a critical challenge facing activists. Regional perspectives from West Papua, Myanmar and Kyrgyzstan revealed how defenders navigate complex political landscapes, whilst Dr



PICTURES OF PAST CONFERENCES

Natasha Ezrow's analysis exposed how female human rights defenders often face double jeopardy – targeted not only for their activism but also for challenging traditional gender roles. The conference demonstrated powerfully how supporting human rights defenders requires addressing not only immediate security concerns but also the broader political and social contexts in which they operate.

His Excellency Mohamed Nasheed, former President of the Maldives, spoke about South Asian human rights defenders, reflecting on his own experience as a human rights defender in the Maldives. He underscored that defending human rights is not just attending seminars, giving short speeches and writing essays, but actually standing up against a dictator and not blinking.

II.6 The centrality of the rule of law to the protection of human rights

The 2011 Conference included a session on contextualising human rights in Asia which was held at the Indonesian Embassy in London. The Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to the United Kingdom, HE Yuri Thamrin remarked that human rights as stipulated in many international instruments are crucially important, including for Indonesia.

The conference included a panel discussion titled "The Rule of Law in Asia". The United Nations defines the rule of law as requiring legal processes, institutions, and norms to be consistent with human rights. Professor Marie Conte-Helm, Director General of the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, opened the session on good governance and the rule of law. Alex Wilks from the International Bar Association gave a brief introduction to the independence of the legal profession and bar associations and made linkages to the maintenance of the rule of law and the administration of justice. Since 2004, he explained, the Human Rights Institute at the International Bar Association has been involved in establishing and developing Afghanistan's first ever national bar association. He provided an overview of the context within which rule of law organizations operated on the ground in Afghanistan. He noted that capacity of the justice sector is extremely weak and public confidence in the rule of law is low. Between 70-80% of disputes are settled through an informal legal system; many people are not aware of their constitutional rights, and even senior officials and judges are often unaware of the basic role of a lawyer/right to defence. He also noted that there are security issues faced by lawyers providing legal aid or pursuing a progressive agenda for example, with respect to women's rights. These are not only from armed criminal groups but also other conservative elements within Afghan society.

Following the detailed exposé on the rule of law in Afghanistan, the conference was informed by Ai Kihara-Hunt, then a PhD student at the University of Essex, about developments in Timor Leste. A recent scoping mission to the capital city of Dili had assessed the need for the establishment of a national bar association. For a new State in a post-conflict situation, there is a shortage of lawyers and other complicating factors such as a lack of indigenous legal vocabulary.

During a separate panel on access to justice, Isabelle Arradon of Amnesty International spoke about her experience with the Asia-Pacific region. She gave examples of cases she had worked on as a researcher on Indonesia, in which ordinary people faced significant challenges to claim their rights and access justice. Often, people do not know the procedures for filing complaints or are reluctant to do so given the prevailing impunity for past abuses and ineffective witness protection schemes.

II.7 Promoting the human rights of particularly vulnerable groups

The relationship between vulnerability, marginalisation and discrimination and human rights protection has featured in many panels of the conference series. How to ensure the protection of human rights of the most marginalised groups in society has been a constant focus of the series and a crucial human rights challenge in many Asian countries.

The specific protection needs of minority groups was one of the focuses of the 2010 conference. During the conference, Professor Ian Neary surveyed the experiences of the Buraku minority group in Japan. He explained that the Buraku are believed to be descendants of social outcast communities from the feudal age, and they have suffered continuous discrimination. Professor Neary's remarks stemmed from his research on Matsumoto Jiichiro, the leader of the Buraku liberation movement from the 1920s to 1950s, and also the policy process addressing the Buraku question from World War II through the Cold War.

At the 2011 conference, Catherine Bevilacqua introduced the problem of caste discrimination in South Asia and Jayshree Manghubhai, University of Utrecht, went on to discuss the challenges facing Dalits and the work of the Dalit Women's movement. Farah Milhar of Minority Rights Group focused on discrimination of minority groups in South Asia. She noted in particular the discrimination faced by ethnic Tamils and the Tamil-speaking Muslims in Sri Lanka by the majority who speak Sinhalese. She also noted the discrimination faced by Muslims in India, with some being denied participation in mainstream education, and frequently denied access to bank loans or equal opportunities to sit the Indian Civil Service Exam. Some other ethnic groups (like Nagas in the North-eastern part of India) also face similar experiences of employment and education-related discrimination. Muslims in Nepal also faced discrimination such as being prohibited from engaging in religious practices, from political participation and access to educational opportunities, and discrimination in ownership of local land and resources. Discrimination was exacerbated in times of conflict. Lance Lattig from Amnesty International focused on the discrimination faced by migrant workers in Malaysia, giving the example of migrant workers from Sri Lanka working in Malaysia. He also noted that Malaysians of Indian origin were more prone to the death sentence, custodial torture and deaths. Economic discrimination was also practised widely against minorities and migrant workers, exacerbated by lack of birth registration for migrant births which fuelled further gaps in access to education and services. Owing to Malaysia's failure to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees were ranked as illegal migrants and suffered further exploitation in Malaysia.

The theme of minority rights protection continued at the 16th conference in 2024: ***Connecting the Dots of Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices*** which explored the continuing marginalisation experienced by oppressed minority groups in different countries. Maira Aisaeva, an activist and Chair of the UK Uyghur Community since 2021 and member of the World Uyghur Congress explained the challenges her family faced following the Chinese Communist Party occupation of East Turkestan (now known as Xinjiang) in 1949. In 2015, the Chinese government passed a controversial counterterrorism law to suppress Turkic and Islamic identity expression in the region. This law targeted predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and Turkic minorities who wear hijabs, have beards, and attend mosques. The legislation mandated forced changes in appearance, such as women being required to cut their long skirts and men forced to shave their beards. The law listed 48 offenses, including religious practices like praying five times a day, attending mosques, and fasting during Ramadan. Concentration camps were used to detain, torture and disappear Uyghurs and other minorities. Women have been subjected to systematic rape and forced sterilization.

The 2017 conference ***Gender and Sexuality Rights in Asia*** examined gender and sexuality rights in Asia, taking an intersectional approach that revealed how discrimination compounds across religious, migrant and ethnic identities. Using case studies from Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, speakers demonstrated how traditional values are wielded to restrict rights while also highlighting emerging spaces for resistance. During the 2011 conference, Syinat Sultanalieva of the NGO 'Labrys' from Kyrgyzstan, concentrated on the discriminatory experiences faced by LGBT in Kyrgyzstan. She described a lamentable situation, absent many basic human rights not to mention minority rights, amid the prevalence of gender stereotypes and social bias and myths surrounding such minorities. She explained that being LGBT in Kyrgyzstan involves mental and physical torture and sometimes forced kidnapping. Statistics on violence include: 'curative rape', physical violence on families for change of sexual orientation; forced admissions to psychiatry and asylum.

The 2018 conference ***Children's Rights in Asia*** examined how young people's rights are protected - or violated - across the region. Keynote speaker Kara Apland set the tone by highlighting how economic growth and urbanisation were creating new vulnerabilities for children, while also offering opportunities for protection. The conference was particularly informative in addressing specific challenges, from unaccompanied children at EU borders to the legacy of China's one-child policy. Through presentations on juvenile justice in Nepal, Bangladesh and India, speakers like Mandira Sharma and Ahmed Ehsanul Kabir revealed how legal systems often fail to adequately protect children's rights, while discussions of child trafficking and sexual abuse highlighted the ongoing challenges of protecting society's most vulnerable members.

Discrimination based on health-related grounds has been a regular topic of discussion. In 2011, Ms Sarah Nancollas, Executive Director of the NGO LEPRO Health in Action, noted that leprosy – which is curable if patients receive the required treatment quickly – is rampant in India, and associated with abuses like stigma and marginalization owing to widely held myths and stereotypes.

II.8 Indigenous Peoples

The 2022 conference *Indigenous Peoples: Contemporary Challenges and Victories* brought together powerful voices like Phoolman Chaudhary, the Asia Expert Member to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Chaudhary underscored that acknowledging and respecting indigenous peoples' rights should not be limited in the provision of the interpreted UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the ILO Convention and in any national or international laws. He stressed that there was a need to widen the meaning of autonomy and self-governance based on indigenous' own values and principles. Gladson Dungdung, the General Secretary of the Jharkhand Human Rights Movement, based in Ranchi, India noted the significant population of indigenous peoples in India. They comprise 700 Adivasi groups forming 8.6% of the population in India i.e. 104 million people. Military operations and the actions of mining companies in Saranda Forest were both having a significant impact on the lives of Adivasis living there. Special military operations were launched by the State against indigenous peoples on the ground of combatting growing extremism among them. The security forces and local police deployed in these operations seized 35 Adivasi villages, forcing the people to move, paving the way for more mining operations.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, former UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples' Rights, shared her decades of experience in advocating for indigenous rights within the UN system. Her account of how indigenous peoples helped shape the concept of collective rights at the UN offered valuable historical perspective on how grassroots movements can influence international frameworks. The conference was particularly notable for highlighting both struggles and successes. Joan Carling's examination of how UN treaty bodies engage with indigenous rights revealed ongoing challenges in implementation, while Khalil Alamour's powerful testimony about the Bedouin communities' fight for recognition in the Negev/Naqab region of Israel illustrated how indigenous peoples continue to face existential threats to their lands and way of life. Through cases from Nepal to Myanmar, speakers demonstrated how indigenous communities face multiple challenges from development projects and state policies, while also showcasing their resilience and innovative approaches to protecting their rights.

In 2024, Rode Wanimbo, Chair of the Women's Department of the Evangelical Church of Indonesia, spoke about the restoration of cultural heritage in West Papua and noted that the indigenous West Papuan struggle encompasses not only the political right to self-determination but also the protection of their livelihoods, the pursuit of peace and justice, and the safeguarding of the environment. She depicted the traditional Honai home of the Dani tribe, which she belongs to, illustrating the longstanding harmony between West Papuans and their natural surroundings. For generations, colonisers deemed them uncivilized and sought to impose their own ideals through missions of civilization, as recounted by early Christian missionaries. This led to the displacement of West Papuans from their cultural identity, fostering assimilation. From the indigenous West Papuan perspective, the land, mountains, and oceans hold intrinsic value. Consequently, the exploitative activities of corporations are likened to rape on their ancestral land, their mother. Displaced from their original communal settings, they were relocated to unfamiliar homes, while their traditional attire was stigmatized as symbols



PICTURES OF PAST CONFERENCES

of poverty and backwardness. Forced assimilation into dominant cultures bred feelings of inferiority. The community bears deep collective trauma, compounded by theological teachings that prioritize individual reconciliation with the creator over harmony with nature and fellow creatures.

Ms. Wanimbo then addressed other injustices such as initiatives like transmigration, where thousands of individuals from densely populated cities in other provinces of Indonesia are resettled in West Papua. According to the state's narrative, this programme aims to teach West Papuans modern farming methods, thereby altering traditional agricultural practices. Consequently, vast areas of the *Sago Forest*, the staple food source for West Papuans and coastal communities, have been replaced with oil palm plantations.

II.9 Migrants, refugees and displaced persons

The 2020 conference's theme ***Human Rights in Asia: Human Trafficking*** was sparked by a tragic local event with global implications: the discovery of 39 trafficked Vietnamese nationals who were found dead in a lorry in Grays, Essex. The bodies were found in October 2019, at the start of the students' academic course, which facilitated a larger conversation on the need for greater exposure of the issue of human trafficking as it relates to Asia. The discussion on human trafficking bridged global frameworks and local realities, with speakers like Parosha Chandran examining emerging challenges such as orphanage trafficking alongside grassroots perspectives from organisations like The Freedom Story. Sarah Mount from the Freedom Fund exposed the complex interplay between development, poverty and human trafficking, and BBC Vietnamese News Editor Giang Nguyen brought a journalistic perspective through his coverage of the Essex tragedy.

The 2021 conference ***Rights of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Asia*** was concerned with refugee protection across the region, with a particular focus on Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Thailand. Much of the focus of the media surrounding refugees and asylum seekers has been on the hotspots in the Middle East and Europe, and the conference committee decided that Asia is a crucial component that should be included in these debates and discussions.

Drawing over 300 participants in its online format, the conference revealed stark contrasts between countries that had signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and those that had not. Aurvasi Patel from UNHCR set the context by highlighting how signatory status did not necessarily translate to better rights protection, while speakers like Takgon Lee and Eri Ishikawa revealed the challenges faced by asylum seekers in countries like Korea and Japan. The conference was particularly powerful in highlighting refugee voices, including testimony from Kurdish asylum seekers in Japanese detention centres.

The 2025 conference ***Beyond Borders: Displacement in Context of Conflict and Climate Crisis in Asia*** focused on the role of two critical factors in fuelling displacement in Asia: armed conflicts and climate change.

II.10 Conflict, Peacebuilding and accountability

Conflict and peacebuilding were important features of the 2010 conference. A panel on democracy and human rights included a presentation on the peacebuilding process in Nepal: Building Democracy, Combating Impunity and Strengthening Human Rights. Nahakul Subedi and Rishi Robertson discussed emphasized the importance of ensuring a transition to a stable democracy to ensure lasting peace. Without systematically addressing past violations, it was argued, Nepal would continue to face major challenges bringing the peace process to a successful conclusion. Another presentation focused on the prospects for accountability in Timor-Leste. Benícia Eriana Magno considered the circle of impunity for human rights violations during the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste (1975-1999). She argued that there is a need for civil society and the international community to help create an environment in Timor-Leste and Indonesia conducive to bringing the alleged perpetrators to justice, which are essential for establishing peace, the rule of law and democracy in Timor-Leste.

The analysis on Timor-Leste was picked up by Han Dorussen during the 2015 conference *Democracy and Human Rights in Asia: Progressing or Retreating?* as part of a panel on transitional justice in Asia. Also in 2015, journalist and activist Kanak Dixit considered the crimes committed during the war in Nepal that ended in 2006 and the efforts to implement transitional justice in the country. Further, Alex Wilks, from the International Bar Association considered the efforts and many challenges to ensure accountability in Sri Lanka. He noted that the government faced many challenges in its transitional justice programme, including political reconciliation, resettlement of internally displaced persons and land restitution, truth-telling and accountability. It is important for the Sri Lankan government to communicate and engage with all sectors of Sri Lankan society on its transitional justice and reform initiatives, which will require time and patience. It will have to meet both the urgent demand for truth and justice that has been denied for too long for victims of its bloody conflict, and the need for incremental, strategic reform in a process that is transparent and inclusive.

The 2025 conference *Beyond Borders: Displacement in Context of Conflict and Climate Crisis in Asia* considered among the topics covered, displacement due to war and conflict.

III. Student Leadership in Action

A remarkable feature of the conference series has been its success in empowering students to take genuine ownership of complex academic events. Under Dr. Fujita's guidance, each year's organising committee - typically comprising six to eleven postgraduate students - has handled everything from theme development to speaker selection and event management.

The diversity of the student committees has enriched the conference significantly. Members have come from across Asia and beyond, bringing varied perspectives and often direct experience in human rights advocacy and policy work in their home countries. Many organisers have had backgrounds in activism, law, or grassroots mobilisation in their home countries, lending authenticity and practical insight to the conference planning process.

Many of the students have gone on to significant roles in human rights organizations, UN bodies, and academic institutions. The networks and skills developed through conference organization have proved valuable in their professional development. As Hayman Oo, from the 2014 student committee, emphasized, there was a sense of responsibility to bring awareness to human rights issues in Asia, particularly given the relative lack of attention to these issues in European universities. Similar views were underscored by 2023 student committee member Imahue Muñoz Carrasco:

“Even though, we had top notch speakers, it was the opportunity to connect with other students and human rights professionals who share a passion for these issues that made the whole experience unforgettable. As a human rights lawyer, I was thrilled to be part of the organising team and gained valuable practical skills in conference organisation that will serve me in my future career.”

Many alumni of the Essex human rights LL.M and MA programmes have come back in subsequent years to lend their experience to the Human Rights in Asia conferences series. For example, at its 2024 conference, Ai Abe, a human rights activist, researcher, and a writer based in Okinawa, Japan and a visiting researcher at the University of the Ryukyus that serves as secretariat of the All-Okinawa Council of Human Rights (AOCHR) was a key presenter. She received her LL.M in International Human Rights Law with Distinction from the University of Essex in 2019.

Other alumni who have returned to Essex to participate in the Human Rights in Asia conference series include Anna Bulzomi (LL.M 2011), Iain Byrne (MA 1994), Evie Francq (LL.M 2009), Paul Green (LL.M 2004), Ai Kihara-Hunt (PhD 2016; LL.M 2004), Ayano Kikuchi (LL.M 2010), Ishbel Matheson (LL.M 2007), Tomoya Obokata (MA 1998), Mervat Rishmawi (LL.M 1994), Mandira Sharma (LL.M 2000; PhD 2021), Isa Soemawidjaja (LL.M 2009), Alex Wilks (LL.M 2004), and many more still.

IV. Impact and Legacy

What began as a student initiative has grown into a significant platform for human rights discourse, with impact extending far beyond Essex. The conference series has created a valuable archive of human rights discussions in Asia, with each year's proceedings documenting both persistent challenges and emerging issues in the region.

The annual [reports](#) have become important resources for researchers and practitioners. They provide unique insights into how human rights discourse in Asia has evolved over time, capturing both academic analysis and frontline perspectives from activists and advocates.

V. Looking Forward

With each new academic year, the Human Rights in Asia conference series continues to evolve while maintaining its core commitment to student leadership and academic rigour. The challenges facing human rights in Asia - from digital surveillance to climate justice, from corporate accountability to religious freedom - remain as pressing as ever.

“The conference must continue to be a platform where emerging human rights issues can be examined critically,” Sanae Fujita has noted, “while ensuring that student organisers have the freedom to shape discussions according to contemporary needs.”

VI. Conclusion

The Human Rights in Asia Conference series continues to provide a space for critical dialogue, bringing together academic expertise and student leadership to address pressing human rights challenges.

As the conference moves forward, it builds on a remarkable legacy. Its alumni—now working in human rights organisations, UN bodies, and academic institutions worldwide—are a testament to its lasting impact. The conference's ability to adapt, including its expansion into online formats, has broadened its reach and deepened its influence.

Looking ahead, new challenges in the region will demand fresh perspectives and sustained commitment. Yet, with its strong foundation of student leadership, academic excellence, and global engagement, the Human Rights in Asia conference series is well placed to continue shaping the discourse and practice of human rights for years to come.

The **Essex Human Rights Centre** extends its sincere gratitude to all **the student committees** who have worked tirelessly to organise the conference each year, to **the guest speakers** who have enriched the discussions, to **Sanae Fujita**, who has continued to mentor and support the student committees over many years, and to **the academics affiliated with the Human Rights Centre** who have contributed in different ways to the series, including Katya Alkhateeb, Kevin Boyle, Judith Bueno de Mesquita, Julian Burger,

Alexandra Cox, Han Dorussen, Andrew Fagan, Youseph Farah, Carla Ferstman, Michael Freeman, Carlos Gigoux Gramegna, Geoff Gilbert, Françoise Hampson, Julie Hannah, Paul Hunt, Marija Jovanovic, Sheldon Leader, Natasha Lindstaedt, Zibiah Loakthar, Zainab Lokhandwala, Noam Lubell, Lorna McGregor, John Packer, Renos Papadopoulos, Colin Samson, Clara Sandoval-Villalba, Ahmed Shaheed, Tara Van Ho, Lars Waldorf, Gina Yannitell Reinhardt, Sir Nigel Rodley, Rainer Schulze, Lorna Woods, Anil Yilmaz Vastardis who have contributed to the discussions.