

Voice, Vulnerability, and Uneven Governance in Contemporary Asia: Editors' Introduction

Across contemporary Asia, questions of who may speak, learn, move, receive care, and access public services are negotiated through institutions that extend beyond legislatures and formal policy documents. Power operates through university spaces, school regulations, refugee-camp procedures, household relations, municipal service systems, diaspora organisations, and development-finance arrangements. The significance of these sites is heightened by a wider context of democratic backsliding and restrictions on expression and civic space (Nord et al. 2026), the institutionalised exclusion of Afghan girls and women from secondary and higher education (UNESCO 2025), the protracted displacement of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (United Nations in Bangladesh 2025), and the sharp contraction and uncertain future of official development assistance (OECD 2026). For Asian Studies and the social sciences more broadly, the challenge is therefore to connect regional and global transformations with the everyday settings in which people experience, negotiate, and contest them.

Journal of Asian Social Science Research (JASSR), Volume 8, Number 1 (2026), addresses this challenge through seven studies covering Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Cambodia, India, and transnational connections between South Asia and the Gulf. Although this is a regular issue rather than a formally designated special issue, the articles converge around a shared concern: the unequal distribution of voice, protection, institutional capacity, and social recognition. Collectively, they show that authority is neither located exclusively in the state nor fully displaced from it. It is assembled through relationships among governments, communities, families, humanitarian organisations, markets, civil society, and transnational networks.

Three themes give the issue its coherence. First, language and cultural practice are not merely reflections of politics; they are means through which political claims, identities, and memories are produced. Second, vulnerability is structured through institutions and social relations rather than reducible to individual disadvantage. Third, decentralisation, humanitarian assistance, and development intervention succeed or fail through local configurations of authority, resources, coordination, and trust. Across these themes, the articles document agency and resilience without romanticising them or treating local coping as a substitute for rights and public responsibility.

Language, Voice, and Political Imagination

Research on contentious politics has long examined collective claim-making, repertoires of action, and interactions among challengers, authorities, and other political actors (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). “Walls of Resistance: Graffiti, Language, and Student Protest in the July Movement at Dhaka University,” by Md Sabbir Hossain, expands this literature by placing the material and multilingual environment of protest at the centre of analysis. Combining field observation, photographic documentation, content analysis of 18 graffiti samples, and interviews with eight students, the study examines borrowing, code-switching, code-mixing, adaptation, morphological variation, and semiotic meaning across Bangla, English, Persian, Urdu, and Spanish. It shows how campus walls became a contested linguistic landscape through which resistance, solidarity, anger, satire, and collective memory were made visible. The article therefore extends linguistic-landscape scholarship on the socially and politically meaningful use of words and images in public space (Shohamy and Gorter 2009; Pennycook 2009). More specifically, it demonstrates how protest graffiti can operate as a communicative resource, a form of political claim-making, and a medium of collective memory.”

Language also circulates through less confrontational but equally consequential networks. In “Urdu as Soft Power: Language, Diaspora, and India’s Cultural Diplomacy in the Gulf States,” Mohammad Shahnawaz examines Urdu as a transnational cultural resource. Drawing entirely on secondary materials—including scholarship, policy documents, institutional reports, literary sources, organisational records, news coverage, and digital archives—the article identifies Urdu’s roles as a heritage language, *lingua franca*, medium of cultural memory, and platform for interaction through literature, cinema, music, education, journalism, and digital media. Its argument revises state-centred accounts of soft power. While Nye defines soft power as the ability to shape others’ preferences through attraction rather than coercion or inducement (Nye 2004), Shahnawaz conceptualises Urdu as a form of relational linguistic soft power produced through diaspora networks. The article also identifies a productive policy tension: institutional recognition may strengthen cultural activity, but excessive state incorporation could weaken the autonomy that sustains its credibility.

Together, these studies demonstrate that language creates publics. Whether written quickly on a campus wall or reproduced through long-standing diaspora institutions, language positions actors within local histories, transnational repertoires, and competing understandings of political and cultural community.

Gendered Exclusion, Displacement, and Care

A second cluster examines how authority and inequality become embodied through education, displacement, and maternal health. “Educational Policy, Power, and Gender Inequality in Afghan Secondary Education under Taliban Rule,” by Bibi Zainab Nasiri, addresses a defining instance of institutionalised gender exclusion. Afghanistan remains the only country in the world where girls and women are systematically denied access to secondary and higher education (UNESCO 2025). Based on interviews with female students and teachers from four provinces, supported by policy documents, NGO reports, and academic research, Nasiri examines how educational restrictions are legitimised through religious and cultural narratives that reinforce male-dominated authority. Participants describe distress, diminished aspirations, unequal treatment, curriculum restrictions, and exclusion from decision-making. Yet the article also records online learning, underground schools, female-led learning spaces, and advocacy presenting girls’ education as both an Islamic and human right. Its central contribution is to show that education policy not only regulates schooling but also organises gendered citizenship and political control.

The politics of protection is explored in “Silent Suffering and Structured Vulnerability: Rohingya Women in Bangladesh’s Refugee Camps,” by Md. Sohorab Hossain and Nishat Tabassum. Through qualitative synthesis of academic research, humanitarian reports, NGO documents, and credible media sources, the authors analyse how gender, statelessness, displacement, patriarchal norms, camp policies, aid dependency, and implementation gaps interact. They identify overlapping exposure to gender-based violence, restricted mobility, limited healthcare and education, economic dependency, weak legal protection, and overcrowded living conditions. Informal networks, caregiving, religious practices, women’s centres, and small livelihood activities provide important forms of support. Nevertheless, the article rejects the assumption that resilience can replace institutional protection. Its conclusion reinforces the 2025–26 Joint Response Plan’s emphasis on protection, resilience, gender-sensitive participation, and accountability to affected populations, while making the case for a more explicitly rights-based approach to refugee governance (United Nations in Bangladesh 2025).

The issue then moves from humanitarian governance to family relations and care. In “Postpartum Depression in Urban India: A Pilot Study from Prayagraj District, India,” Shivangi R. Kiran and Ritu K. Sureka report a cross-sectional pilot study involving 30 women within six months of delivery in Chak Dondi, Naini, Prayagraj. Using the Edinburgh

Postnatal Depression Scale, a structured questionnaire, descriptive statistics, and exploratory bivariate tests, they find that 23.3 percent of participants screened positive for possible postpartum depression. Higher risk appeared alongside younger age, financial dependence, nuclear-family residence, psychiatric history, unplanned pregnancy, obstetric complications, son preference, domestic violence, strained relationships, and limited in-law support, while family support appeared protective. The authors appropriately avoid population-level claims from a small purposive sample. Their contribution lies in locating maternal mental health within household economies, reproductive expectations, gender norms, and relational support. The policy implication is consistent with WHO guidance on integrating perinatal mental health into maternal and child health services in ways adapted to local and cultural contexts (World Health Organization 2022).

Read together, these articles locate gendered inequality not only in law and ideology but also in educational opportunity, refugee administration, reproductive expectations, household relations, and access to care. They also show why participation is substantive rather than procedural: policies concerning women and girls remain incomplete when those most affected cannot influence educational governance, humanitarian decisions, or health-service design.

Local Governance, Development, and Institutional Capacity

The final two articles examine the distance between assigning institutional responsibility and enabling institutions to fulfil it. In “Decentralized Waste Governance and Local Implementation Challenges in Cambodia,” Monyroth Thlork investigates implementation of Sub-decree No. 113 in Leuk Daek District, Kandal Province. The study analyses open-ended responses from 45 household residents and 45 market vendors, together with interviews involving three district administrators and two waste collectors in Prek Dach, Prek Tanlop, and Kampong Phnom Communes. Low collection fees, inadequate bins and disposal sites, irregular services, unclear responsibilities, limited fiscal transfers, insufficient technical guidance, and weak local capacity emerge as interrelated constraints. The creation of a district waste-management committee and training in disposal-site management, composting, and the 3Rs nevertheless indicate incremental progress. The article adds district-level evidence to decentralisation research by showing that transferring functions is not equivalent to transferring effective authority. A World Bank–financed

project approved in 2023 similarly combines institutional strengthening and service-system reforms with investments in waste collection, landfill, recycling, and composting capacity (World Bank 2023).

A related problem of institutional substitution appears in “International Aid Withdrawal as a Systemic Livelihood Shock: Socioeconomic Consequences in Rural Bangladesh,” by Shifat Anwar Tumpa, Ashraful Siddique, Mohammad Anwarul Islam Pathan, Apu Debnath, MD Sayeed Mostafa, Md. Atikul Islam, and Rakib Hossain. Based on 12 focus group discussions and eight key informant interviews across Kurigram, Sunamganj, Khulna, and Rajshahi, the study examines the experiences of farmers, women, youth, former beneficiaries, officials, NGO personnel, community leaders, and former project staff. Thematic analysis indicates that donor withdrawal disrupted agricultural production, household income, healthcare, education, nutrition, women’s economic activities, and disaster preparedness. The authors consequently conceptualise withdrawal as a systemic livelihood shock rather than a discrete reduction in project funding. This framing is especially timely amid the sharp decline in official development assistance recorded in 2025 and projections of further contraction in 2026 (OECD 2026). The study identifies local replacement capacity as a decisive factor: adverse effects intensify where public institutions, markets, and community organisations cannot absorb functions formerly supported by aid.

Together, the Cambodian and Bangladeshi articles challenge procedural accounts of decentralisation and transition. Institutional responsibility must be matched by fiscal resources, technical competence, coordination, infrastructure, and public participation. Localisation should not become a rationale for transferring risk downward without transferring authority and resources.

Future Research and an Invitation to Engage

This issue opens several research agendas. Future studies could examine how protest inscriptions move between physical and digital spaces and how their meanings change after movements subside. Comparative research might test whether diaspora-generated linguistic soft power retains legitimacy when states provide funding or formal recognition. Longitudinal work is needed on the educational, psychological, and political effects of prolonged exclusion in Afghanistan and on the safety and sustainability of alternative learning networks. Refugee-governance research should ask when women’s participation changes protection and resource-allocation

outcomes rather than remaining consultative. Larger and mixed-method studies of postpartum depression should connect screening with clinical assessment, service access, and household relations. Research on decentralisation and donor exit should identify which combinations of fiscal authority, local accountability, market capacity, and civic organisation allow essential services to survive institutional transition.

These questions require scholarship that is comparative without flattening context, theoretically ambitious without detaching itself from evidence, and attentive to both institutions and lived experience. The geographic range and methodological diversity of this issue demonstrate the value of bringing grounded Asian research into conversation with wider debates on contentious politics, soft power, gendered governance, public health, decentralisation, and development transition.

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