2018 was a tumultuous year to say the very least with tensions and struggles between the left and the right in both the US and the UK. But 2018 also was the year when citizens made powerful stands against unfettered power.

This is the year that Christine Blasey Ford testified against Brett Kavanaugh, who would then go on to be elected to the Supreme Court of the United States. This would further fuel the #MeToo movement, which started at the end of 2017, and take it across borders to the Indian cinematic industry. It culminated in the stepping down of MJ Akbar, who was the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, after his ex-media colleagues and underlings came forward to accuse him of sexual harassment. This was the year of the Parkland shootings, where 17 students were shot. This ignited the rise of student activism against the NRA, where students organised and participated in protests named as the ‘March for Our Lives’—touted as the biggest youth-led protests since the Vietnam War.

Closer to home, in Malaysia, voters turned up in massive numbers to remove the party which was in power for more than 60 years, in a bid to halt corruption in the country. Pakistan elected Imran Khan as Prime Minister. In both countries, young people had pushed for change.

A number of countries in the region were preparing for elections, casting questions on activists and organisations on whether to be pragmatic or to push for progress. A number of elections such as in Bangladesh were marred with violence and conflict.

This was the stage upon which women’s rights and SRHR organisations were to implement programmes and strategies which was to take forward the agenda. The year started with ARROW and partners urging in a written petition to United Nations Economic and Social Commission on Asia and Pacific (UNESCAP) to ensure the full participation of CSOs in a robust process around the Asian Pacific Population Conference (APPC) Mid-Term Review and a sound set of indicators to monitor progress towards the APPC. This was signed by 194 NGOs in the region. In preparation for the APPC, ARROW helped mobilise our partners across 13 countries to generate national reports for International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+25), and to dialogue with their governments on their findings.

Creating new spaces for advocacy and dialogue has been a critical endeavour in times of political uncertainty. 2018 saw ARROW again being in the lead of organising the Youth Forum for the Asian Pacific Forum, and this venue being recognised as one of ESCAP’s official processes to feed into the Asian Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD). We also created a new space at the regional level for amplified action on implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) by working with UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNFPA to bring together 90 government officials, regional and national civil society organisations representatives, and UN agency representatives from 15 countries in the Asia Pacific Region.

ARROW also organised and hosted the first regional She Decides event in Kuala Lumpur to commemorate the first anniversary of the launch of She Decides. ARROW is one of the She Decides champions, and we felt it was imperative to bring the movement and ground it in Asia—as a means of ensuring a consistent platform and voice on sexual and reproductive autonomy and agency. This first event was held in cooperation with the embassies of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands, and brought together activists from 12 different countries and 100 Malaysian participants around stories from the grassroots in both pictorial and spoken formats, and discussions on the local issues of sexual and reproductive rights of girls and women.

ARROW also initiated and launched the Women and Earth (WORTH) Initiative which functions as an innovative
advocacy fund. The fund solicits good ideas from NGOs to advocate the inter-linkages between gender, SRHR, and climate change, and takes them through an innovation process that enables them to refine their ideas. The ideas are then picked through a competitive process and those that win, obtain a grant.

ARROW’s two largest projects focus directly on the sexual and reproductive rights of young people and the right to safe abortion in particular. This enables us to build grassroots movements across different countries to mobilise and advocate for these two critical issues.

The right to safe abortion work concentrated on increasing capacities for evidence generation around abortion at the national level with partners across five countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, and the Philippines—as a strong evidence base is necessary to demand accountability from duty-bearers. The partners also called to form a Solidarity Alliance on the Right to Safe Abortion—a Global South alliance.

This is critical work in a world ruled by the fanatical anti-women ideologies that drive policies like the Global Gag Rule. And through this we hope to bring our own to the political tableau that adds to the progressive movement of #Repealthe8th in Ireland and Argentina.

The other is on the sexual rights of young people, which in the Asian region continues to be heavily contested. Stakeholders working towards raising the age of marriage are also considering raising the age of consent so both are kept in tandem, without recognising young people’s autonomy. Religious laws in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia are categorising pre-marital sex as crimes and applying sanctions such as whipping.

Sexual diversity is also criminalised and this implies that the state is imposing heteronormativity upon its citizens. Establishing perspectives on young people’s autonomy to make decisions over choice of partner, and timing of marriage; as well as ensuring their rights to do so are protected and fulfilled, is a vital pursuit for activists and organisations in the region.

2018 was a fulfilling year despite the turmoil and the political upheavals. We continued to collaborate with our 94 partners around the world as we “push back against the pushback,” to quote the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. We relentlessly worked together with our partners to make interventions, advocated for the overall improvement of SRHR of women and young people in Asia Pacific and beyond, as we move one year closer to mark the 25th anniversary of the historic ICPD in Nairobi. The best years are those which are very often forged in the fiery furnace, because the work that comes from those years is built and bound with strength, and stands the test of time.

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