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Devin K. JOSHI

Singapore Management University, devinjoshi@smu.edu.sg

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CONCLUSION

Comparing Women's Representation in Asian Parliaments

Devin K. Joshi

This chapter summarizes important findings from this study while identifying common trends across Asia and the sub-regions of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. It begins by examining to what degree Asian parliamentarians have prioritized substantive representation of women (SRW). It then assesses whether SRW was a primary reason or motivation behind why members of parliament (MPs) entered politics in the first place and whether they viewed SRW as a pressing issue for their governments to address. It also probes whether MPs regularly consult and interact with female voters as well as which groups of women in society the MPs (claim to) support. It considers whether parliamentary committees and other practices and norms within Asian parliaments are supportive of SRW and compares differences between how women and men MPs differ in their advocacy. It also assesses the potentially positive impacts of gender quotas and having a critical mass (i.e. > 30%) of women representatives. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing recommendations offered by Asian parliamentarians on how to improve gender equality and what lessons Asia might hold for SRW in general, including the roles of critical mass, electoral reform, cross-party alliances, and institutional design.

Is Gender Equality a High Priority for Asian Parliamentarians?

MPs' Motivation to Enter Politics

As the chapters in this book have emphasized, substantive underrepresentation of women both impedes the achievement of gender equality and constitutes a serious democratic deficit because it means that half of the demos is not properly represented in the government's priorities, laws, policies, and actions. Therefore,

to assess whether SRW motivated parliamentarians to join parliament, MPs interviewed for this study were asked to state what motivated them to enter politics.

In South Asia, where fundamental issues of overcoming poverty and providing basic human needs are pressing, governments and MPs typically prioritized economic development issues while giving lower priority to gender equality. As pointed out in the introductory chapter of this book (Joshi 2023), per capita income levels are closely correlated with democracy index scores across the ten countries in this study, and democracy scores were lower for the South Asian countries compared to their counterparts in Southeast Asia and East Asia. Relatedly, none of the Bangladeshi MPs interviewed (6 female, 2 male) entered politics specifically to address SRW. In Sri Lanka, only one woman out of six MPs interviewed (3 female, 3 male) entered politics to address SRW (Jayasekara 2023). By contrast, four women out of eight MPs interviewed (6 female, 2 male) in Nepal entered politics for this reason. This divergence lends support to the idea that critical mass matters for SRW (Dahlerup 1988). Whereas descriptive representation of women (DRW) is low in Sri Lanka (5% women MPs) and Bangladesh (21% women MPs total but only 6% directly elected) (Kabir 2023), Nepal has 33% women MPs in its lower house and 38% women MPs in its upper house. This is due to Nepal's constitutional one-third gender quota in addition to parliamentary quotas for other marginalized groups which have contributed positively (though still inadequately) to intersectional representation of marginalized women (Adhikari 2023).

In the Southeast Asian countries in our study, where democracy index scores were in the upper middle range, most MPs entered politics for reasons unrelated to gender equality as in Timor-Leste, a lower income country, where only one woman out of nine MPs interviewed (5 women, 4 men) entered politics to pursue SRW. Similarly, in the Philippines, no males (out of 5) and only one woman MP (out of 6) as well as none of the 8 MPs (6 women, 2 men) interviewed in Indonesia entered politics for this reason. The lone contrasting case in Southeast Asia was the relatively wealthier upper-middle income country of Malaysia where two out of three women interviewed in its National Assembly and two out of four women in state-level assemblies entered politics to advance SRW, although no male legislators in Malaysia entered politics for this purpose.

Turning to the higher-income countries in our study from East Asia, all of which scored highly (>8.00) on the democracy index, three out of eight women MPs (38%) interviewed in Taiwan were motivated by SRW to enter politics. Similarly, many women MPs interviewed in South Korea joined politics out of deep frustration with male-dominated workplaces in different occupations. For three of five women (60%) and one of seven men (14%) MPs interviewed in Japan, pursuing SRW was also a primary motivation to enter politics.

What these findings reveal is that, first, not a single male MP interviewed from South Asia or Southeast Asia was motivated to enter politics to advance SRW. Second, in South Asia and Southeast Asia, most women MPs did not go into politics to improve gender equality either. Third, in East Asia, at least half of women MPs entered politics for the purpose of SRW. Fourth, the countries of Nepal,

Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan stood out for having a greater share of women MPs entering politics to advance gender equality. The latter four were the wealthiest countries in this study whereas Nepal is an exception perhaps due to its combination of strong leftist party influence, one-third gender quota, and new democratic constitution of 2015.

Is Gender Equality a Priority Issue for Asian MPs?

MPs interviewed in this study expressed what they felt were the most important issues today that need government's attention. Country researchers then assessed whether any of the issues MPs mentioned were related to SRW. Altogether, only 10% of male MPs (3/31) viewed SRW and gender equality among the top priority issues compared to 45% of women MPs (23/51), revealing a significant gender gap. Thus, while about half of Asian women MPs felt SRW was a priority issue, 90% of Asian male MPs did not. This finding is salient considering that most women and men who took part in this study were probably more inclined than the average MP toward supporting SRW having given consent to participate in a study about gender equality.

In the case of South Asia, three out of six women MPs in Bangladesh saw SRW as one of the most pressing issues. In both Sri Lanka and Nepal, however, only one out of six MPs expressed that SRW was among the most pressing issues for government to address. In Sri Lanka, the top issue as expressed by most MPs was economic development, but half of Sri Lankan MPs interviewed (two women and one man) linked this to SRW. In Nepal, MPs identified the COVID pandemic as the most important issue, but this too relates to SRW as over the past two years COVID has been one of the greatest threats to women's survival and well-being in South Asia.

In Southeast Asia, SRW was seen as a priority issue for government to address by eight out of 24 women MPs but only two out of 16 male MPs. The lowest prioritizations were among women (1 of 6) and men (0 of 5) in the Philippine Congress who saw poverty and the pandemic as most pressing with similar results among women (1 of 6) and men (0 of 2) in the Indonesian parliament. SRW was given relatively higher priority by Timor-Leste's women (2 of 5) and men (1 of 4) parliamentarians and by women (4 of 7) and men (1 of 5) legislators in Malaysia.

Unlike the other two regions, the majority of women MPs in East Asia saw SRW as a high-priority issue for government to tackle. This was the case for all women MPs interviewed in Japan (5 of 5), one out of seven Japanese male MPs, and half of the women MPs interviewed in Taiwan (4 of 8). Likewise, in South Korea, all women MPs interviewed pointed out how "gender quota and women's safety issues (including stalking and sexual violence) are urgent issues" (Shin 2022). Here we see a strong and positive correlation between a country's (higher) level of economic development and MPs prioritizing SRW and gender equality on the political agenda.

Do MPs Actively Consult With Female Voters?

MPs were asked whether they make a serious effort to work and consult with female voters. Overall, across Asia, the results were 92% for women (47/51) compared to only 55% for men (16/29). In South Asia, all women MPs claimed to consult their constituents actively. In Bangladesh, all MPs interviewed stated that they make a serious effort to consult/work with female voters regardless of whether they were in a directly elected seat (i.e. in a single-member district) or reserved seat. This was also the case in Nepal and for Sri Lankan women MPs but for only one out of three male MPs in Sri Lanka. While the other two Sri Lankan male MPs also worked with female voters, they conceded working more closely with male voters. One reason for this, however, lies in prominent social norms involving gender segregation in certain aspects of the public sphere that impede political communication across the sexes.

Similarly, in Southeast Asia, women MPs worked more closely with female voters than male MPs. In Indonesia, all women MPs and no male MPs actively consulted female voters. In Malaysia, all women legislators and four out of five male legislators actively worked with women voters. In Timor-Leste, engagement with women voters was present for a slight majority of women MPs (3 of 5) but only half of male MPs (2 of 4). Lastly, among Filipino MPs, slight majorities of both women (4 of 6) and men (3 of 5) actively consulted female voters.

As in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, a gender divide was observable within East Asia, whereby all women MPs from Taiwan and Japan actively worked with female voters regardless of whether elected from a party-list or a direct constituency. However, in Japan only three out of seven male MPs actively engaged with women voters.

Overall, two puzzles emerge from these results. First, why do some women MPs not consult women voters as observed in countries like the Philippines and Timor-Leste? Second, why do some male MPs not consult women voters as observed in both less affluent countries like Timor-Leste, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka but also highly affluent Japan? What these findings suggest is that some MPs are not actively connecting with and ascertaining many of their constituents' needs. They may also not feel heavily reliant on interaction with female voters to be reelected perhaps due to the dominant role played by dynastic families (e.g. the Philippines, Sri Lanka) or political party elites (e.g. Japan, Timor-Leste) in determining which candidates are nominated and into which districts or which positions on party-lists.

Which Groups or Types of Women Do MPs Represent?

MPs in this study were asked which women they represent politically. In South Asia, male MPs in Bangladesh and Nepal did not mention which women they represented whereas in Bangladesh, all women MPs except one said they represent all women while one woman MP stood for disadvantaged women. In Nepal, three women MPs said they represent Nepalese women. Another woman MP claimed to represent marginalized women while one stood for both women and men from

marginalized communities. Lastly, one Nepali woman MP supported women with disabilities and victims of domestic violence. In Sri Lanka, women MPs variously stood for “all women,” “women of this country,” “young women” (from a youth parliamentarian), or “all women with special emphasis on women in informal employment and young women” (Jayasekara 2023). Two Sri Lankan male MPs said they represented women in their own electoral constituencies while another stood for Muslim women.

In Southeast Asia, all women MPs in Indonesia claimed to support women in general as did four women MPs in Malaysia with one Malaysian female MP supporting marginalized and discriminated women. Among Malaysian male MPs, one mentioned urban poor women (reflective of his constituency), another stood for single mothers, rural areas, and poor women, and another for his female constituents. Women MPs in the Philippines mentioned specific groups of women such as young women, teachers and mothers, solo parents and teen mothers, lesbians and transwomen, and mothers in general. Filipino male MPs also mentioned the urban poor and single mothers, union leaders, potential overseas Filipina women migrant workers, and women in general. Lastly, in East Asia, several South Korean MPs stood for the youth including young women while in Taiwan all but one of the women MPs said they supported “all women” with the other specifically attentive to immigrant women.

To conclude, efforts by MPs to target particular groups of women with benefits appeared to be higher in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Nepal whereas in some countries, like Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Taiwan, women MPs reported supporting “women in general” or “all women” which suggests a feeling of solidarity and not leaving any single woman behind. At the same time, the lack of a more focused answer by these MPs may reveal inattention to or under-prioritization of particular groups of women who need different and additional support than others precisely because their circumstances are different.

Do Institutions Within Asian Parliaments Support Gender Equality?

Parliamentary Committees

Among the key venues for scrutinizing, deliberating, revising, and approving proposed legislation are the parliament’s various standing and select committees. In this study, researchers assessed whether MPs felt the parliamentary committee environment was supportive of gender equality and women’s interests. Overall, the responses were mostly positive according to two-thirds of male (17/26) and three-fourths of female (31/42) MPs interviewed.

We also compared committees on which women MPs comprised a “critical mass” (CM) (i.e. 30% or more of committee members) with their non-CM counterparts. We found women MPs on CM committees were 80% satisfied (16/20) whereas women MPs on non-CM committees were only 62% satisfied (8/13) that

the committee environment supported women's interests and gender equality. We also found male MPs on CM committees 100% satisfied (2/2) compared to male MPs on non-CM committees who were only 40% satisfied (6/15) that their committee was supportive of gender equality and women's interests. This latter finding suggests that Asian male MPs nowadays might actually be more progressive on gender equality than usually assumed. At least among the male MPs interviewed for this research, most seemed to be aware that male dominance of committees is not conducive to SRW. Whether they are willing to change this situation is another matter, but at least some awareness is there.

The evidence from this research also suggests that the key critical mass cut-off points in Asian parliaments lie around 17.5%, 40%, and 62.5%. First, when comprising less than 17.5% of committee members, most women on parliamentary committees were unsatisfied with how it represented women's interests. This closely fits with academic research on group proportions and the expectation that token members (comprising less than 15% of a group) will have little to no influence in a group (Kanter 1977). By contrast, when women comprised at least 40% of committee members, women were almost always satisfied with how it represented women's interests. Lastly, when women comprised at least 62.5% of committee members, women were always satisfied with its representation of women's interests.

There were, however, several differences across countries. In South Asia, all MPs in Bangladesh (where committees ranged from 7% to 60% women) felt the parliamentary committee environment was supportive of gender equality and women's interests. Men in Nepal whose committees had either 19% or 46% women members also felt this way. As one male MP in Nepal pointed out, on his committee the chairperson is a woman and women are very vocal in his committee. Another Nepali man mentioned how MPs listen to women's concerns very seriously in his parliamentary committee. However, not all Nepali women MPs agreed with this. Some felt women were not given a chance to speak or that it is very difficult for women to have a say in the committees (Adhikari 2023). Contrastingly, women MPs interviewed in Sri Lanka (who sat on committees where women's share of members ranged from 20% to 100%) felt the parliamentary committee environment was supportive of gender equality and women's interests, but Sri Lankan male MPs (serving on committees with between 0% and 14% women members) disagreed primarily because no women served on their committees. Thus, Sri Lankan male MPs interviewed readily acknowledged a glaring gender deficit in parliament signaling that they might be willing (or at least permit others) to take action to remedy this imbalance.

In Southeast Asia, the picture was mixed. In Indonesia, two women MPs on parliamentary committees with respectively 16% and 26% women members did not feel their committee was supportive of gender equality. By contrast, four Indonesian women MPs on committees with 11%, 14%, 35%, and 35% women members respectively felt the committee environment was supportive. Thus, it seems that there is a notable difference between lower satisfaction at 26% and higher satisfaction with 35% women's representation. However, Indonesian male MPs on

committees with only 10% and 20% women both felt the parliamentary committee environment was supportive of women's interests and gender equality. This suggests that men are more likely (compared to women) to feel a committee is supportive of gender equality under conditions where men comprise the overwhelming majority of members. In Malaysia, two MPs (one woman and one man) on a committee with 74% women both felt the parliamentary committee environment was supportive of gender equality whereas women and men MPs on committees with 13% and 14% women did not feel the committee environment was supportive of gender equality and women's interests. Lastly, in both the Philippines and Timor-Leste, which have higher DRW, all MPs except for one woman MP felt the committee environment was supportive of SRW.

In East Asia, two Japanese women MPs on parliamentary committees with only 4–5% women members felt their committees were unsupportive of women's interests and gender equality. By contrast, three Japanese women MPs on committees with 18–35% women members felt their committees were supportive. In Taiwan, three women MPs on parliamentary committees averaging 45% women (with respectively 31%, 43%, and 60% women) did not feel the parliamentary committee environment was supportive. By contrast, five Taiwanese women MPs on committees averaging 56% women (with respectively 39%, 43%, 54%, 73%, 73% women) members felt the environment was indeed supportive of gender equality and women's interests.

Bullying and Harassment

MPs who participated in this study were asked if they ever experienced or witnessed harassment, bullying, or seeing women treated according to a gender stereotype in parliament – all of which can have seriously negative effects on legislators and the legislative environment. Among respondents who claimed to experience or observe such treatment there were fewer men (31%, 9/29) than women (44%, 23/52) although this apparent gender gap was not statistically significant (Chi-square = 0.244). Overall, the study revealed both women and men in parliament were to some degree aware of harassment though some male MPs seemed to hardly recognize sexism (e.g. Adhikari 2023; Encinas-Franco 2023). Fortunately, the majority of MPs interviewed were not harassed, but it is highly disturbing that 44% of women MPs (and 31% of men MPs) experienced (or witnessed) some form of bullying, harassment, or gender stereotyping in parliament. Mental and verbal harassment including micro-aggressions were reportedly the most common form whereas physical harassment was rare. Interviewees also revealed that bullying is a problem commonly faced by both women and men parliamentarians in Asia.

In South Asia, no male MPs expressed any awareness of such behavior in parliament. By contrast, five out of six Nepali women MPs did. They mentioned how male MPs tend to cut off women in the parliament while they are speaking by saying that they know the issue already. They stated that women MPs are still not able to put forward their concerns and issues openly, that women MPs were not selected

for leadership positions, and that women were harassed based on their clothes and had their capabilities questioned because they were females. In Bangladesh, two out of eight MPs (both women) also mentioned harassment while no MPs (0 out of 6) mentioned this in Sri Lanka. However, there were indications of indirect forms of discrimination with women expressing how uncomfortable they felt with the verbal bullying common among Sri Lankan male MPs.

In Southeast Asia, no women or male parliamentarians mentioned experiencing or observing gender-based harassment, bullying, or stereotyping in Indonesia. This was also the case in Malaysia for state-level assembly legislators whereas all women and male MPs interviewed in Malaysia's national parliament experienced or witnessed this. In the Philippines, such abuse was witnessed by four of six women MPs and one of five male MPs. In Timor-Leste, three of five women and two of four men mentioned it. Likewise, in East Asia, two out of five women and four out of seven men experienced or observed gender-based harassment, bullying, or stereotyping in Japan. Similarly, in Taiwan, four out of eight women experienced or witnessed this.

Overall, these findings indicate that higher levels of democratic and economic development among Asian countries were not correlated with any decrease in gender-based bullying, harassment, or stereotyping of MPs. Unfortunately, such demeaning behavior was present in most Asian parliaments, and Indonesia, the only country where this was not reported, appears to be an exception in the region perhaps due to its large share (55%) of women in senior and leadership roles, a rarity in Asia (Prihatini 2023).

Party Discipline

Do MPs in Asia have the freedom to vote according to their conscience or are they required to vote the party line on bills involving gender issues? On this question, we found no statistically significant difference between responses from women (28%) and men (27%) in parliament. The key divides were across countries and parties and this largely corresponded with levels of economic and democratic development whereby MPs had more autonomy in more affluent and more democratic countries. It also appeared that MPs were typically more constrained by party leaders in parliamentary systems of government than in presidential or semi-presidential political systems. For instance in Taiwan and South Korea, all MPs interviewed in national-level parliaments were free to vote as they pleased on gender issues. This was also the case in Malaysia and Indonesia. By contrast, in Bangladesh all MPs stated that they have to vote with their party on gender issues. This was also generally the case for MPs interviewed in Japan and Nepal and often so in Timor-Leste.

Interestingly, in Nepal, despite having high numbers of women in parliament, respondents noted how women generally have to stay within party limitations and work on issues selected by their party. Thus, party discipline appears to be a double-edged sword that may help to maintain intraparty unity and overall cohesion within parliament while simultaneously preventing MPs from exercising their own

personal views and preferences when voting. In a context where patriarchal party leaders decide women parliamentarians' voting choices this becomes problematic.

Cross-Party Alliances

Another relevant aspect of the parliamentary context is whether MPs are able to work through cross-party alliances to support SRW. On this issue, we found a significant gender gap whereby women (72%, 34/47) were much more likely to participate in cross-party alliances supporting SRW than men (26%, 7/27). Yet, the fact that slightly over one out of four male parliamentarians interviewed were involved in such alliances indicates that SRW is an issue some male MPs in Asia are indeed willing to support.

There were, however, notable differences across countries. In Bangladesh, no MPs worked to support SRW through cross-party alliances. In Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Indonesia no male MPs, but all women MPs interviewed worked to support SRW through cross-party alliances. Similarly, in Taiwan, all women MPs interviewed worked to support SRW through cross-party alliances. Partial support for SRW through cross-party alliances was also found in the Philippines (4 out of 6 women; 3 out of 5 men) and Japan (2 out of 5 women; 2 out of 7 men). Lastly, in Malaysia all interviewed women and men MPs in the national assembly worked to support SRW through cross-party alliances.

Interestingly, in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, where there are few women in parliament, a nonpartisan/multi-partisan women's caucus played an important role in advocating for gender equality. Women's alliances across parties were also evident in countries with a critical mass of women MPs in Taiwan, Timor-Leste, and Nepal. Also, it appeared that governments formed out of multiparty coalitions, in some cases prompted by fully or partially PR-based electoral systems (as in Indonesia, Nepal, and Taiwan), were more likely to have cross-party women's alliances and active women's caucuses. By contrast, countries where a majority of seats in parliament is held by a single party or where the main axis of political competition is between two large political parties, cross-party alliances to advance SRW were rare as in Bangladesh and Japan or restricted to fewer issues as in South Korea and Timor-Leste. Having a women's caucus in such countries would help to overcome otherwise stark partisan divides.

Comparing Bangladesh to Nepal also illustrates the potential role of proportional representation (PR)-based electoral systems in advancing gender equality. In Bangladesh, with its disproportional single-member district (SMD) electoral system as used in many former British colonies, all MPs interviewed for this research insisted on full anonymity revealing a tense and tenuously democratic political situation as reflected in Bangladesh's very low score on press freedom (see Joshi 2023). Though also a low-income country which has experienced political instability in recent decades, Nepal has a PR-based electoral system, a critical mass of women MPs, and in its parliament some women MPs have worked actively together with their counterparts from other parties on common issues concerning women.

How Asian Parliamentarians Seek to Improve SRW

Current Policy Advocacy

As this study has revealed, many parliamentarians in Asia did not consider gender equality and SRW as high priority issues and this was especially the case among men. Yet, both women and men MPs have advocated various SRW-related policies in recent years. In South Asia, MPs interviewed for this study worked on issues of child marriage and violence against women. In Bangladesh, they contributed to the National Women Development Policy, Children's Act, and Representation of the People's Order. In Nepal, MPs worked to empower marginalized women, stop domestic violence, end gender-based discrimination, enable citizenship through mother's name, and implement gender quotas in politics. In Sri Lanka, MPs campaigned to stop female genital mutilation, remove the marital status of parents on child birth certificates, curtail workplace harassment, promote women in senior management, and address the Muslim marriage law. They also worked on behalf of women in migration, education, and unemployment plus women's hygiene and hygienic products and in support of maternal leaves and benefits.

In Southeast Asia, MPs supported many kinds of SRW-related policies and issues. In Indonesia, these included domestic violence, health, citizenship, family resilience, agriculture, and violence against women. Specific laws included those addressing Eradication of Domestic Violence (2004), Eradication of Human Trafficking (2007), and Population Growth and Family Development (2009). In Malaysia, MPs worked on legislation related to sexual harassment, domestic violence, sexual violence against children, stalking, divorce among young couples, the swimming attire of Muslim sportswomen, child marriage, amending the standing order of parliament to curb sexist remarks, increasing the DRW in politics, single mothers, and gender equality in general. Malaysian MPs also supported gender budgeting, better understanding of gender in the school curriculum, training and skills for women's economic empowerment, a state agency for women, and supporting women entrepreneurs (Ahmad Zakuan 2023). In the Philippines, MPs worked on policies regarding young women's sexuality education, a divorce law, sexual and reproductive health, antidiscrimination based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE), violence against women, a safe spaces law, expanded maternity leave, women's labor issues, and gender-based violence and harassment (Encinas-Franco 2023). Specific laws in the Philippines included the Anti-Trafficking Law (2003, 2013), Reproductive Health Law (2012), Magna Carta of Women (2009), Safe Spaces Act (2018), and Expanded Maternity Leave Law (2019).

In the higher-income countries of East Asia, there was also much attention to violence-related issues as well as economic concerns and personal autonomy. SRW policies advocated in Japan included liquid baby formula, "poverty of menstruation" (i.e. inability to afford menstruation hygiene products), selective choices of married couples' surnames, women-friendly public toilets reform, support for

domestic violence victims, a law for promoting equality in politics, and tax reform for babysitting services (Eto 2023). In South Korea, women MPs advocated policies addressing the effects of COVID-19 on working mothers, work–family balance, and support for women’s childbirth through measures like parental leave. In Taiwan, SRW policies advocated by women MPs included reproductive health, stalking prevention, sexual harassment, same-sex marriage, equality in the workplace, immigrants’ rights, gender quotas, gender equality education, care workers’ rights, women’s welfare, and eliminating domestic violence (Huang 2023).

Some SRW issues like combating violence against women, workplace harassment, and gender-based discrimination were on the agenda almost everywhere. Yet, certain SRW issues like child marriage, removal of parents’ marital status on a child’s birth certificate, female genital mutilation, and citizenship through mother’s name were expressed more prominently by South Asian women MPs. Meanwhile, certain countries like Taiwan in particular but also the Philippines and Timor-Leste witnessed relatively more advocacy of LGBT women’s rights. Lastly, important SRW issues of agrarian/land reform and migrant/immigrant women came up more often in some countries than others. Notably, the former was less present in countries like Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, which have more urbanized populations, and where large-scale equalizing land reforms were already carried out in the mid-twentieth century after the Second World War. By contrast, these issues were vocalized more frequently by Southeast Asian MPs in countries long enduring Western colonization like the Philippines and Indonesia (and also in South Asia), where highly unequal land tenure, low wages, and women relocating overseas (often without their family members) to find better paying jobs are common.

Obstacles to Reform

Throughout Asia, the societal belief that men should be the ones in powerful political positions continues to discourage women from participating in politics and working for gender equality. In Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Indonesia, social attitudes were highlighted by MPs as primary obstacles to reform. The double burden placed on women to do extensive household duties in addition to the work required of them as political representatives in these countries and elsewhere in Asia makes it very difficult for many women, especially mothers of young children, to serve as parliamentarians (Joshi & Goehrung 2021). Other impediments to gender equality identified by MPs in Bangladesh included lack of discussions in parliament, lack of educational infrastructure, a patriarchal society with outdated social norms and customs, gender-based discrimination, and bureaucratic complexity. In Nepal, MPs mentioned party leaders, government, the lack of trust in women, party policies that are not women-friendly, and the belief that there already is more or less gender equality.

In Malaysia, women MPs experienced sexist, racist, and vulgar remarks in parliament and had limited time for debate. As in Japan, the relatively small number of women representatives in Malaysia contributes to a lack of gender awareness

and a political culture of male dominance. Moreover, in Japan, gender equality was obstructed by old-boy networks, exclusive circles of men, the marginalized position of women, male-defined working styles, women's own consciousness, and the so-called postwar economic model (Eto 2023). Lastly, in the Philippines, Christian churches and the weaponization of religion, conservatives, the business sector's refusal to grant maternity leave, and male MPs' belief that there already is gender equality were identified as major obstacles to gender equality (Encinas-Franco 2023).

MP Recommendations for the Future

To make future progress on SRW and gender equality, many Asian parliamentarians felt it is imperative to (a) change social attitudes and (b) make necessary structural and institutional changes to government and the economy. Although male MPs generally had less recommendations than women MPs in parliament, MPs almost everywhere called for increased participation of women (i.e. greater DRW) in both politics and legislatures. Other reforms they highlighted included the following:

Electoral Reform

Almost half of all MPs interviewed in this study called for election reforms to improve gender equality and this was consistent across all ten countries. Many MPs additionally called for introducing and strengthening legal (i.e. statutory) or constitutional gender quotas that affect all candidates. Also, they supported quotas for parliamentary candidates adopted voluntarily by political parties themselves.

In South Asia, Nepalese MPs called for 40% women's representation in every form of government at all levels though one dissenting Nepali woman MP argued the quota system should not be kept for a long time as leadership should be determined by a person's capabilities. In Bangladesh, women MPs recommended increasing the participation of women through direct elections as opposed to using reserved seats. One reason for this is that reserved-seat women MPs in Bangladesh are not treated as full MPs – they get only one-third the allocation of development funds for their constituencies, they get less time to talk in parliament, and they are often viewed as merely a tool of the ruling party to sustain their majority in parliament (Kabir 2023). The majority of MPs interviewed in Sri Lanka called for a gender quota while some women recommended women-led electorates plus a mixed electoral system in which 75% of seats are based on the people's votes and 25% from nomination.

In the Philippines, male MPs advocated gender balance in leadership, introducing a gender quota, political party reforms, state subsidies for political parties, and a two-party system. Filipina women MPs supported honest elections, automatic youth registration, affirmative action in political parties, voter education, and equitable representation of women at all levels. Malaysian MPs sought electoral reforms and a quota for legislatures to increase women's representation. Their proposals

included reserved seats for women, a 30% electoral candidate quota for women, parties filing more women as candidates in winnable seats, greater political representation of women from the working class and professions and changing the electoral system toward more of a proportional list system.

In East Asia, Taiwanese women MPs supported both campaign finance reforms and switching to a purely proportional representation (PR) system while Japanese women MPs called for electoral reforms, more women in the Diet and local assemblies, greater party support of women candidates, and good performance by women MPs. Additionally, many Japanese men (and women) MPs advocated mandating a gender quota by law.

Reforming the Parliament

MPs recommended a number of other reforms to their parliaments. For instance Bangladesh MPs insisted that honesty, integrity, and moral principles be followed in parliament. Japanese MPs sought reform of working styles in the Diet, women-friendly party administration, parental leave for MPs, and a female prime minister taking office. Some Indonesian MPs sought to have more cross-party alliances while Filipina women MPs requested more facilities for women in parliament and more incentives to political parties. Malaysian MPs also called for work–life balance to make politics more family friendly plus a strong and permanent committee of women in the parliament and equal descriptive representation in the parliament among both MPs and parliamentary staff. Taiwanese women MPs sought to restructure government to strengthen the power of the legislative branch vis-à-vis the executive branch by switching from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary form of government.

Reforming Education and the Media

To improve SRW and gender equality, parliamentarians emphasized the importance of reforming not only education but also the media, as the latter is powerful and stereotypical in its portrayals of women members of parliament (Joshi, Hailu & Reising 2020). Bangladeshi MPs emphasized increasing the capabilities of women through educating and training women to be better parliamentarians. Indonesian MPs supported having a political school for women and gender training in addition to literacy and raising awareness. Filipino MPs called for both education and eradicating disinformation. Japanese MPs believed it is necessary to remove stereotyped images of women and to reform media coverage of women. They also highlighted potential benefits from social networking services (SNS) (e.g. social media). Nepalese MPs advocated educational reforms and expansion, awareness through media, and providing education to poor marginalized women. Lastly, Malaysian MPs sought to educate all legislators (especially men) to be more gender aware and sensitive to have the right perspectives in making decisions. They also advocated civic education starting in primary school.

Economic and Cultural Reforms

Asian MPs, especially in developing countries, generally believed that economic reforms and cultural changes are also necessary preconditions to achieve meaningful gender equality. For instance in the Philippines, some women MPs called for agrarian reform, various cultural changes, and pro-LGBT legislation. Sri Lankan MPs endorsed measures to support working mothers in the private sector as well as early career support for women and skills-based promotion. Nepalese MPs wanted basic infrastructure development, laws, and policies to develop tourism, generating employment to economically empower women, enabling women to own property by themselves, and granting them access to financial resources.

Bureaucratic and Legal Reforms

MPs also recommended governance reforms. Filipino MPs supported political party development, easing bureaucratic requirements for women, adopting a merit-based system, and properly implementing and enforcing laws impacting women. Japanese MPs advocated abandoning seniority-based rules, disclosing data on social discrimination against women, and having women-friendly party administrations. Sri Lankan MPs emphasized having space for women in party structures, women-friendly legislation, one law for the whole country (“one country, one law”), sustainability of laws and policies, and gender budgeting. Nepalese MPs called for open discussions on issues of discrimination among civil society members, punishing those who do not properly implement laws impacting women, and rewarding those who do. In Malaysia, MPs supported a government based on meritocracy which they felt would allow more talented women (and men) to govern. Additionally, they called for appointments of women to other decision-making posts (e.g. head of division, head of department, and so on) to make sure policies related to women’s empowerment are thoroughly carried out.

Conclusion: Revisiting Our Hypotheses

This study looked at SRW and gender equality in Asian parliaments from the perspectives of (a) individuals and their ideas, (b) institutions, and (c) intersectionality. It included parliaments from three different sub-regions of Asia and at three different levels of DRW in 2021. As might be expected, some form of gender quota was present in all the high- and medium-level DRW parliaments except for the Philippines. At the high (critical mass) level were the parliamentary (single/lower, upper) chambers of Taiwan (42%), Timor-Leste (38%), and Nepal (33%, 38%). At the medium level (more than token but less than critical mass) were the Philippines (28%, 29%), Indonesia (21%), Bangladesh (21%), and South Korea (19%). At the low (token) level were the lower houses of Japan (10%, 23%), Malaysia (15%, 14%), and Sri Lanka (5%). We now end this study by addressing the six hypotheses about SRW raised in the book’s introductory chapter.

The first hypothesis (H1) was that women MPs would do more for SRW than men MPs. Perhaps not surprisingly, the answer to this question in Asian parliaments is generally yes. Women MPs were more likely to enter parliament in order to pursue SRW, more likely to view SRW as a top priority issue for government, and more active than male MPs in engaging and consulting with female voters though most male MPs also consulted female voters. At the same time, not all women MPs prioritized SRW and the proportion of women MPs who did varied significantly across countries and regions. Notably, support for SRW as a top governmental priority was much higher in the wealthier countries of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Malaysia and less prevalent in the lower-income countries of Bangladesh, Timor-Leste, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia with Nepal being a major exception. That said, although SRW may not be a top priority for many women MPs in South Asia and Southeast Asia, they are often still favorable toward pursuing certain forms of gender equality and SRW like eliminating domestic violence, violence against women, and unequal opportunities for women and men in education and employment. It was also the case that some male MPs in Asia prioritized SRW especially among younger MPs. About 10% of male MPs interviewed considered SRW a top priority, one man was motivated to enter parliament specifically to advance SRW, and 25% of male MPs in this study engaged in cross-party collaboration to support SRW.

The second hypothesis (H2) was that a critical mass of women MPs (i.e. >30%) will do more for SRW than a small share of women. Affirmatively, this study finds a critical mass of women MPs to be necessary for SRW in Asia. As this study has demonstrated, critical mass mattered both on parliamentary committees and in parliament in general. As discussed earlier, today, male MPs in Asia are rarely motivated to enter politics in order to represent women. Because men in Asian parliaments do not generally prioritize SRW, continuing male dominance will prevent many SRW issues from reaching the political agenda. Moreover, because only about a third of women in Asian parliaments prioritize SRW there needs to be enough women in parliament so that women who do care about SRW have sufficient numbers (e.g. can serve on all parliamentary committees) to make a difference.

The positive effects of a critical mass were demonstrated in the three Asian parliaments (Taiwan, Timor-Leste, and Nepal) which currently have more than 30% women MPs and the two chambers of the Philippine Congress (28%, 29%) which lie just short of that ratio. In Taiwan, women feel comfortable speaking up in parliament and are not inhibited. They have succeeded in reforming certain institutions within the parliament and passing multiple laws supporting gender equality. Moreover, both of Taiwan's two major parties are involved in sponsoring and passing bills to improve women's substantive representation (Huang 2023). In economically less developed Timor-Leste and Nepal, where the national political culture is usually dominated by senior male leaders and women are expected to do care work for their families, having a critical mass of women in parliament has enabled women to have more political influence than in the past when their presence in parliament was small. In both cases, every interviewed MP (including

men), except one, supported their one-third electoral gender quotas. In Timor-Leste, nearly all informants related instances of strong women's participation and leadership on committees (including their parliament's powerful Public Finance Committee) despite only three or four women typically serving on a committee of 12–13 members (Niner and Tam 2023). In Nepal, more than half of its parliament committees have a woman chairperson (9 of 16), citizenship laws have been amended to grant a child citizenship through their mother, and SRW is typically viewed as a crosscutting issue with Nepalese particularly attentive to structural causes of women's deprivation (Adhikari 2023).

In the countries mentioned earlier, having a critical mass has furthered SRW in parliamentary debates and proposals due to having a sizable number of women from multiple political parties. Also, these countries have greater diversity of women in parliament including LGBT women (Timor-Leste, Taiwan, Philippines), advocates for immigrant and migrant women (Taiwan, Philippines, Nepal), and women from Madheshi, Dalit, rural poor, urban poor, and other marginalized communities (Nepal) represented. Thanks to critical mass, authors in this study found an increased likelihood of “sisterhood and camaraderie of fellow female MPs” advocating SRW on a number of parliamentary committees where according to one woman MP in the Philippines it has become “too unacceptable for a male legislator not to support something that favors women” while one of her colleagues expressed that nowadays “you will hardly find a politician who will actually legislate something that is prejudicial to women” (Encinas-Franco 2023). As Shin (2023) further emphasizes, critical mass facilitates SRW in the long run because critical actors need women's support network, and critical mass provides inspirational role models and mentors for women MPs in the next generation.

Our third hypothesis (H3) was that critical actor MPs do more for SRW than a critical mass of women MPs. We can answer this question in the affirmative as well but primarily because it is essentially tautological. Looking at cases like Timor-Leste and Nepal we are tempted to say yes – numbers of women are high but at the same time support for gender equality is not as strong as one might have expected. For example party leaders selected many women MPs in Nepal from outside their own party thereby mostly benefiting women close to powerful males. Many women MPs in Nepal also try to avoid being too controversial to not upset family members or jeopardize their chances of reelection. However, the cases of Nepal and Timor-Leste also have to be seen in context. Both are relatively economically underdeveloped, in a post-conflict setting with high rates of poverty and have only recently instituted one-third gender quotas for women MPs. The long-term effects of these quotas are still uncertain, but similar post-conflict gender quotas in Asia have exhibited positive effects as seen in Vietnam (Joshi & Thimothy 2019).

Conversely, when we look at Japan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and South Korea where DRW is relatively low, one can readily see how important it is to have sufficient numbers of women. In those countries, there are actually some parliamentary committees without a single woman at all or just a few. Even if some women MPs in such countries are critical actors, they will have no voice

on committees where they are not members. For instance in Bangladesh, despite the prime minister, opposition leader, and Speaker of the House all being women, SRW-related legislation often does not pass although an increased presence of women over time has generally resulted in increased discussions on gender-related issues in such committees (Kabir 2023). Also, in countries lacking a critical mass of women MPs like South Korea there has been a strong backlash and threats of violence against women MPs working on behalf of SRW.

As many chapters in this book have illustrated, critical actors do matter significantly, but it is the combination of critical mass and critical actors that is most powerful and therefore both should be prioritized rather than only one or the other. For instance, Sri Lanka with 5% women in its parliament does have dedicated critical actors (both female and male) but no critical mass, and this is simply not enough for adequate SRW. By contrast, Taiwan has both critical mass and critical actors which makes a huge difference even if other obstacles to SRW are still present.

Our fourth hypothesis (H4) was that certain personal backgrounds of MPs are more favorable to SRW. The answer again is yes. Parliamentarians who came from activist, social movement, civil society, and feminist backgrounds were more dedicated to advancing SRW. Those from political parties that were progressive or to the left were also more likely to support SRW. As for male MPs, those who came from single-mother households, had many sisters, or whose family included feminist wives/daughters tended to be the ones most committed to SRW as observed in Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and South Korea. Men from these backgrounds tended to be more gender-sensitive and supportive of SRW. Younger men were also more supportive of gender equality than those from older generations.

MPs from certain types of backgrounds also appeared to be less supportive of gender equality. For instance as Encinas-Franco (2023) noted in her chapter, MPs' remarks in the Philippines suggest that the business and military sectors have provided neither solid nor balanced socialization on gender issues. Also, less likely to support SRW were MPs coming from dynastic or hereditary political families as common in Bangladesh, Japan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka where a large share of both women and men MPs hail from such families while in Indonesia many women MPs (but fewer men) are now linked to political dynasties too. By contrast, in South Korea and Taiwan, MPs were less likely to have dynastic roots and this appears to have benefited SRW. Therefore, a useful reform in some countries might be to introduce MP term limits for families (as opposed to individual MPs) to give more women-friendly citizens a chance to become MPs. While dynastic origins do not always inhibit SRW as occasionally seen in the Philippines, the most active and passionate supporters of SRW across countries were rarely from established political families.

Our fifth hypothesis (H5) was that certain parliamentary institutions are more favorable to SRW. The answer is also yes. This study found the presence of a nonpartisan parliamentary women's caucus helps significantly to coordinate SRW efforts. A good example is Timor-Leste's women's cross-party caucus (GMPTL) supported by its parliament and UN Women (Niner and Tam 2023). A possible

lesson here is that organizations like UN Women should support women's caucuses in other countries and parliaments such as in Bangladesh, Japan, and Malaysia which would likely benefit from having a strong and permanent nonpartisan women's parliamentary caucus.

Parliamentary committees are another institution potentially supportive of SRW, but they need to be sufficiently powerful to make a difference. For some countries in this study, parliamentary committee powers are fairly strong (e.g. Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea) whereas in others they are relatively weak (e.g. Malaysia, Bangladesh, Japan). SRW also appears to be facilitated by MPs sitting on multiple committees, choosing their own committee assignments (instead of them being assigned by seniority or party leaders), and having the power to easily initiate private members bills that are then treated seriously on the parliamentary agenda as in Taiwan. Gender equality and party diversity among committee headships can also have a favorable effect as opposed to assigning all heads of committees to men from the ruling party. By contrast, party discipline (i.e. forced party-line voting) has often been an obstacle to SRW.

Other institutions supporting SRW include establishing a gender equality commission within parliament as in Taiwan to ensure that MPs, their staff, and those working in parliament have a workplace institution to rely on if they want to file a sexual harassment complaint (Huang 2023). Taiwan's legislature is also supportive of smaller parties that need only three seats in parliament to be eligible to participate in negotiations as compared to 20 seats needed in neighboring South Korea. Another lesson from Taiwan is that its two major political parties both have quotas for women in party leadership positions. As Shin (2023) has pointed out, gender equality within political parties is especially important as women in party leadership positions are often critical actors for SRW. This suggests that gender quotas within parties might have an even greater impact than those within parliament. Therefore, a logical implication might be to introduce electoral law reforms requiring all political parties to have at least 30% or 40% members of either sex on their leadership boards in order to be certified to contest elections.

As for electoral institutions, in countries with mixed electoral systems like the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan, MPs elected via multimember district proportional representation (PR) party-lists were often more committed to SRW than MPs elected from single-member districts. Therefore, electoral laws for parliaments in Asia can be amended so that multimember districts and PR lists cover more or all parliamentary seats. PR elections can also improve women's descriptive representation by encouraging or requiring zipper-style alternation of women and men nominees on party-lists. However, this study revealed that PR lists (and the women candidates on them) can also be controlled by male leaders as evident in some parties in Indonesia, Nepal, South Korea, and Timor-Leste. Both PR and SMD elections therefore seem to better facilitate SRW when MPs are not limited by their party to serve only a single term in parliament, when vote buying is disallowed, when election campaigns are not expensive, and when the parliament itself is sufficiently strong and not just a rubber stamp institution.

As for this last point, parliaments in Asia have greater capacity to advance SRW when not overturned by veto players with the power to annul or invalidate bills proposed and passed by the parliament. For instance in countries with a presidential or semi-presidential form of government, the legislature is weaker than the executive branch as neither the political chief executive nor cabinet ministers need to be members of or responsible to parliament. In these contexts, an external actor, namely the president, can overrule the work of the people's representatives in the parliament therefore rendering their efforts at times futile (e.g. Huang 2023). Conversely, even in a parliamentary system, a prime minister who is too strong and who essentially acts independently of the parliament (sometimes labeled as "prime ministerialism" (e.g. Kabir 2023) can be a major obstacle to SRW.

As for the cameral structure of parliament, it seems that unicameralism may generally benefit SRW as it removes the upper house as an additional veto player. For instance in East Asia, women's representation has encountered more obstacles in Japan (which has a bicameral system) than in the unicameral systems of Taiwan and South Korea. This disparity may also be linked to the dominance of one political party in Japanese politics compared to the predominantly two-party systems present in Taiwan and South Korea.

When one political party dominates a legislature, the assembly as an institution plays a weaker role in governance thereby presenting an obstacle to SRW. In quite a number of Asian countries, the executive branch of government dominates policymaking while legislators serve a primarily symbolic role of approving bills in parliament. The strength of parliamentary committees is likewise relevant here. Countries with weak parliamentary committees typically had less advances in SRW (as in Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Japan) whereas SRW was comparatively stronger in countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and especially Taiwan, where parliamentary committees were relatively stronger.

Another means to systematically improve SRW is by conducting regular gender audits of parliament to assess gaps in mainstreaming gender issues into the institution's processes, administration, rules, rituals, and practices (Encinas-Franco 2023). The audits' findings can then serve as bases for implementing comprehensive reforms to achieve a gender-sensitive parliament (Palmieri 2011). Lastly, another important institutional feature influencing SRW significantly and negatively in much of Asia as most evident in less affluent South Asia and Southeast Asia is corruption and not following the rule of law. When this happens, electoral violence, money politics, and vote buying discourage many qualified women from running for public office.

The sixth and final hypothesis (H6) under consideration was that greater diversity of MPs would lead to better substantive representation of women from different backgrounds. The results of this study once again strongly imply the answer is yes. In many countries, women MPs most strongly advocating SRW belonged to small parties, had roots in activism, and were younger and better educated. As women with these profiles comprised a minority of parliamentarians, authors in this book consistently emphasized the need to have greater diversification of women (and men) MPs to improve SRW. This was also because unlike the typical

elitist members of Asian parliaments, many social groups including the poor, landless, low- and middle-income majority, ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic minorities, and those under the age of 45 have little if any voice in parliamentary deliberations. As one Japanese MP stated,

[P]eople with diverse backgrounds should constitute the parliamentary membership and share power by engaging in policy-making together. In other words, the parliamentary membership should reflect the diversity of people in society. However, ironically, the Diet membership mirrors Japan's patriarchy where senior men dominate women and young men.

(as quoted in Eto 2023)

As Eto (2023) noted in her response to this quote,

People tend to better understand those who share commonalities than those who are different. Ms. B's argument, accordingly, is true. The more female MPs are diverse in background, generation and socio-economic circumstances, the more women's voices will be appropriately heard.

Likewise, writing on Sri Lanka, Jayasekara (2023) emphasizes how,

It is therefore necessary to look into what measures can be taken to motivate women to enter parliament from all ethnic and religious groups today to create a balance in the descriptive representation of women. The aim should not be to further segregate women based on their ethnicity, but to provide equal democratic opportunities to all women.

To sum up, this study compared SRW and efforts to advance gender equality in Asian parliaments both having and lacking a critical mass of women legislators. From the perspective of the latter where DRW (i.e. numbers of women in parliament) is low, critical mass is crucial to achieve SRW. From the perspective of the former where DRW is high, critical actors are crucial for advancing SRW. Therefore, both critical actors and critical mass are necessary in Asian parliaments and this study correspondingly found that those factors which inhibit DRW generally also impede SRW. From the perspective of all, moreover, changing societal attitudes toward gender and gender roles is essential and perhaps the most important ingredient of all. Gender equality has to become the norm for women to be fully and properly represented in Asian parliaments and elsewhere.

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