

## Women in Asian Local Politics – A Springboard for Gender Democracy?

Guest Editors: Andrea Fleschenberg and Claudia Derichs<sup>1</sup>

From a worldwide perspective, Asian women were once at the cutting edge of female political participation. Female prime ministers and presidents have repeatedly governed several Asian nations: Bangladesh, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan. Women politicians have also been at the forefront of reform and opposition as well as autonomy movements across Asia, for example Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in Malaysia, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, and Rebiya Kadeer in China. Currently, four out of a worldwide thirty-five female head of parliaments chair one of the national legislatures in Asia: India (*Lok Sabha*, since 2009), Pakistan (National Assembly, since 2008), Turkmenistan (*Majlis*, since 2006), and Uzbekistan (Legislative Chamber, since 2008).<sup>2</sup>

This outstanding participation of women, most of them from political dynasties, is not met by an equal number of women at other levels of political decision- and policy-making across Asia. Take, for example, the following figures on female-to-male ratios in local government bodies: in Afghanistan's provincial councils, 121 women occupy positions compared to 420 men (2007), and in Cambodia's 11,353 commune council seats, just 1,662 were occupied by women in 2008.<sup>3</sup> While the level of executive and legislative representation of women varies significantly among Asian countries, it is fair to say that women are far from possessing a just

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm) (30.11.2009).

<sup>3</sup> [www.iknowpolitics.org/files/UNIFEM\\_factsheet\\_07.pdf](http://www.iknowpolitics.org/files/UNIFEM_factsheet_07.pdf);  
[www.huntalternatives.org/download/1648\\_strategies\\_for\\_policymakers\\_bringing\\_women\\_into\\_government.pdf](http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/1648_strategies_for_policymakers_bringing_women_into_government.pdf) (as of 18.02.2010).

share of representation and participation in most Asian nations, giving way to questions on the democratic quality and inclusiveness of Asian political systems (cf. Drage 2002). The conquest of the top political office has not led to an increase of female political participation—at the sub-national or national levels (parliament, bureaucracy, or government). However, having said that, women have made inroads into Asian politics in diverse and intricate ways—via dynastic descent, quota regulations, civil society activism, or as career politicians.

Interestingly, in 2002 a study on women’s participation in local governments across the Asia–Pacific region found that women “have gained greater access to local government positions than to those in central government,” mostly due to quota provisions (Drage 2002). Such provisions for local politics are in place in countries as diverse as Afghanistan (provincial councils), Bangladesh (union councils), India (all local government bodies), the Republic of Korea (city councils), Nepal (municipal councils), Pakistan (all local government bodies) and the Philippines (local and provincial councils). Except for Korea and Nepal, all countries opted for reserved-seat provisions ranging from 17.6 percent (Pakistan, provincial council), to one third (Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Philippines, local bodies), to parity (Republic of Korea, city councils).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, women were able to enter grassroots politics in significant numbers in those countries. Other countries, such as those portrayed in the following case studies (e.g. China, Cambodia, and Thailand), have so far not chosen the path of positive discrimination although women from various backgrounds are engaging in politics in increasing numbers—be it as voters, candidates, or politicians. In addition, in several countries women occupy various sub-national leadership positions—for instance as provincial (deputy) governors in Afghanistan, Cambodia, India, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, as district administrators in East Timor, as mayors in India, and as heads of municipal/provincial councils in China. Two provincial legislatures were/are headed by a female (deputy) speaker: Rajasthan (India) by Sumitra Singh (in 2003) and Sindh (Pakistan) by Shehla Raza (2008–present).<sup>5</sup>

This special issue will feature four case studies on women’s political participation in local politics in Cambodia, Thailand, India, and China—with and without mechanisms for positive discrimination. The different country studies focus on various perspectives and dimensions of women’s political representation and participation as voters, local politicians, and members of specific social groups such as the indigenous and/or the socio-economically marginalized. All four articles

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<sup>4</sup> Sources:

<http://www.quotaproject.org/>;  
<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/127.html>;  
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,463af2212,464dbe362,499e98d723,0.html>;  
<http://www.capwip.org/readingroom/vietnam.pdf>;  
<http://www.capwip.org/paperscongress/southasiansituationdurga.doc> (as of 18.02.2010).

<sup>5</sup> <http://guide2womenleaders.com> (as of 18.02.2010).

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present unique research on the gendered face of Asian local politics, contributing to the academic debate and discourse on gender democracy, election, and participation studies.

The article **“Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Cambodia”** presents the findings of an action research project undertaken in Cambodia’s northeastern provinces. The project’s goal was to highlight indigenous and Khmer women’s experiences within the commune councils, and to identify the obstacles impeding their full political participation and their ability to transform political practice and style. The study found that the roles of female commune councillors are in many cases constrained to activities consistent with common gender stereotypes. At the same time, their status is challenged by a male-dominated social and political life. The study showed that women involved in local politics claimed to have a different style of governance. This leadership style can be regarded as an important path to achieving democratic participation, and is very relevant in order to respond to the problems currently encountered by indigenous people, including illegal land sales, land-grabbing, mining, deforestation, and pressure from agro-industrial companies. The authors are Sineath Hong and Margherita Maffii. At the time of this writing, **Sineath Hong** worked as a researcher at the Cambodian CBRNM-Learning Institute and collaborated in a study group on women’s roles in Cambodian community fisheries. She has a background in history, sociology, anthropology, and rural development. In 2008 and 2009, she was a researcher with the Heinrich Böll Foundation. **Margherita Maffii** has a background in agricultural studies and has participated in many research projects concerning the situation of women in Cambodia. Besides her contribution to the National Report on the Status of Women in Cambodia for the UN Beijing +5 Conference in 2000, she has been involved in research focusing on the impact of globalization on women, and on the ongoing changes in Cambodia.

Continuing the journey on experiences of women in local politics, the second case study, **“Reconstructing Gender Identity for Political Participation: Hill Tribe Women in Northern Thailand,”** aims to take a critical look into political participation patterns and concerns of female local politicians who are ethnic minorities. The representation of women on local councils is low throughout the country, but it tends to be a particular problem in areas occupied by indigenous minority ethnic groups. The research is based on the hypothesis that women politicians from ethnic minority groups may have to downplay the gender dimension in public policy in order to appeal to the voters and overcome cultural barriers to entering the public political sphere. They need to show that they can project the dignity and capability of their ethnic group, win resources and information from the state, and bring this recognition and other benefits back to their electorate. The article analyzes the role of creative compromise and other coping strategies essential for women in such situations, based on a case study of a prominent woman politician in the Mae Wang District. The author, **Nongyao Nawarat**, is Assistant

Professor in the Faculty of Education at Chiang Mai University, Thailand, and works on questions of gender, development, health, human rights, and public policy. She is also the founder and director of the Multiculturalism and Education Policy Centre.

The case study from South Asia, **“Cast(e) in the Periphery: Understanding Representation of Dalit Women and Politics in India,”** continues to investigate the nexus of intersectionality, discrimination, and female participation in local politics from the vantage point of Dalit women in India. Indian society is deeply gendered, meaning that women have fewer opportunities to participate in public life. Nonetheless, women have entered the political arena at the local government level in high numbers due to a landmark constitutional amendment introduced nearly two decades ago, which has led to a social and political revolution. However, it has also led to the assertion of new political identities at the grassroots level, especially for Dalit women. The article attempts to understand the way caste and patriarchy interact and entwine to restrict and deny women mobility and the right to political participation. It aims to understand the processes of how women are positioned as the bearers of caste honor and purity, and how their political participation and assertion of political identities are challenging centuries of deep-rooted prejudice. The author, **Baishali Chatterjee**, is Programme Officer at the South Asian Regional Office of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in New Delhi, India. Previously, she worked as programme officer at the Delhi regional office of Action Aid International India. She researches healthcare and its integration with HIV/AIDS, the status of women in India, and human trafficking, in addition to questions of women's and human rights.

Moving to East Asia, the article **“Who Are True Voters? Village Elections and Women's Participation in Voting in Rural China”** evaluates survey findings of national voting statistics with regard to the participation of rural women in village elections, presenting the reader with an important gendered perspective and critique of Chinese local politics. Although national voting statistics show that more than 90 percent of individuals in rural China vote, anthropologists in the field have found that the actual participation in village elections is probably lower—especially among certain groups, such as (young) women. They are excluded to some extent in village elections. The goal of this paper is to provide an empirical basis for understanding the voting behavior of women in rural China and to assess the determinants of their voting patterns. Policy-wise, the preliminary results show that China's government needs to increase its effort to promote more regular voting procedures to ensure that women are “true” voters and “truly” participate in village committee elections. The authors are Xiaopeng Pang and Scott Rozelle. **Xiaopeng Pang** is Associate Professor at the School of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development at Renmin University of China. She was a visiting scholar at the University of California, Davis, and taught contemporary Chinese economy at Kwansei Gakuin University, Japan. Her research interests include village elections and local

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governance, agricultural economics, gender and development, and industrial organizations. **Scott Rozelle** is the Helen F. Farnsworth Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, U.S., and works on agricultural policy, transitory market / economic institutions and their evolution as well as on the economics of poverty and inequality in China. Previously, he was a professor at the University of California, Davis, and an assistant professor in the Food Research Institute and Department of Economics at Stanford University.

### References

Drage, Jean (2002) 'Women in Local Government in Asia and the Pacific', Local Government New Zealand, 25.02.2002. Online. Available HTTP: [http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/reports/comparative\\_report.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/huset/women/reports/comparative_report.pdf) (accessed 14 April 2010)