

Women's Political Participation and Leadership

Situational Analysis: Asia and the Pacific

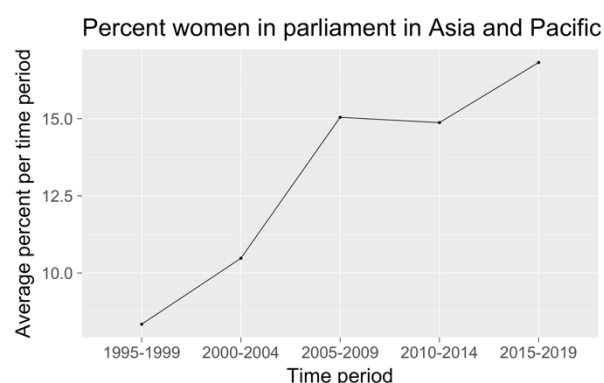
This policy brief suggests measures to increase women's leadership in politics.

Women's leadership in political spheres is shown to be socially beneficial (World Economic Forum, 2017), and is a matter of women's right to equal opportunity and access. While in the Asia Pacific region women's political participation has increased since the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, the region lags behind global trends: women's parliamentary representation in Lower or Single House in the region is 20%, whereas the global average is 25%.¹

Though there has been progress over the past 25 years (Figure 1), there is still much room for improvement to reach the 30 percent threshold. Sub-regions face different challenges with regards to women's political participation. For instance, while East and Northeast Asia currently has the highest representation of women in parliament, the rate of the change has been the slowest. If the current rate of annual change can be sustained, North and Central Asia would be the only sub-region to meet the 30% threshold by 2030.²

Though there are different patterns across the region, all countries may consider the strategies in this brief to stimulate women's political leadership.

Figure 1: Average percent women in parliament per 5-year period since Beijing Platform for Action



Source: ESCAP calculations based on IPU data (accessed 12 July 2019). Available <https://data.ipu.org/>.

Importance of women's political leadership

Global commitments

In the Beijing Platform for Action, stemming from the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, the prioritization of women's leadership was outlined in sections G.1 and G.2: "take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making" and "increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership", respectively.

Two decades later, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscored the need and urgency to achieve gender parity in

¹ ESCAP calculations of weighted average based on IPU data, as of 1 September 2019 (accessed 24 October 2019). See <https://data.ipu.org/>.

² ESCAP calculations based on IPU data (accessed 12 July 2019). See <https://data.ipu.org/>.

leadership through SDG Target 5.5, necessitating “women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.”

Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women explicitly mentions women’s political equality (Articles 7-9) and discusses women’s equal participation at all levels (Article 7b): “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women on equal terms with men, the right to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government” (Part II, Article 7b). These commitments collectively express that women’s right to equality cannot be reached without equality in political decision-making positions.

Positive social outcomes from women’s leadership

Women’s political leadership has been shown to have several societal benefits, such as inequality reduction (WEF, 2017), increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines (Markham, 2013), and increased prioritization of social issues, like health, education, parental leave, and pensions (Markham, 2013).

Additionally, women’s political participation has been shown to be particularly influential to women in their communities. Factors such as female voter turnout, female political participation, and public service responsiveness towards women have a positive relationship with the presence of women in decision-making positions across the public and private sectors (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001).

Role Model Effect

Women’s parliamentary presence could also have a role model effect. A study underscored the importance of women role models for individuals of all genders to normalize “the idea and practice of women holding power” (O’Neil, Plank and Domingo, 2015). A 2012 study conducted in India explained that the increased proportion of women village leaders had closed the “aspiration gap” between girls and boys by nearly 25 percentage points and had eventually erased or reversed the gender gap in educational outcomes. Girls also began spending less time on household activities in areas with increased women’s leadership in the village (Beaman and others, 2012).

These role models can substantively affect future women’s representation. Following the 2018 general elections in Fiji, women account for 20 per cent of the representation in Parliament, a record high for the country.³ This is attributed to the role-model effect of its first Woman Speaker of the House.

Challenges

Time use and care work

One barrier to women’s political participation and leadership is time use. Women spend up to four times as much time on unpaid care work than men in the region, precluding them from economic and political participation (ILO, 2018). Unpaid care work is one of the primary reasons that women cannot enter politics (Tadros, 2014).

Furthermore, studies have also indicated that social norms often create preferences for women candidates with household profiles (e.g., married and with children), which creates a double bind for women (Teele, Kalla and Rosenbluth, 2018). Thus, women have to combat the norms regarding care work, and also norms regarding desirable traits in women candidates.

³ Fiji National Review on Beijing+25, available at Asia-Pacific Portal for Gender Equality, Country Reviews. Available at

[www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Fiji%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Fiji%20(English).pdf).

Leadership seen as a male domain

On average, over 50 per cent of the respondents from the region “agree” and “agree strongly” that “men make better political leaders than women do” (World Values Survey, 2014). These perceptions about leadership often translate into reality. Vanuatu’s submission for the Beijing +25 review explains that “the dynamics of a traditional patriarchal context, which prescribes rigid gender roles excluding women from formal decision-making spaces such as the parliament” are one of the reasons why no women were elected to parliament in the last two elections.⁴

Backlash, harassment and violence

An Inter-Parliamentary Union study on 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries shows that 82 percent of the interviewees have experienced psychological violence, remarks, gestures and images of a sexist or humiliating nature, or threats and mobbing (IPU, 2016). Nearly 44 percent had received threats of death, rape, beats or abductions. Around 20 percent of women parliamentarian respondents have been slapped, pushed or struck with a projectile that could have harmed them.

A country report written for the Asia-Pacific Regional Beijing +25 Conference underscored this point: “Double Standards, blackmailing and smear campaigns in the media are actively used against women politicians, resulting in their short influence. As a result of violence against women during elections and political activities... two political parties have... no women members at all”.⁵

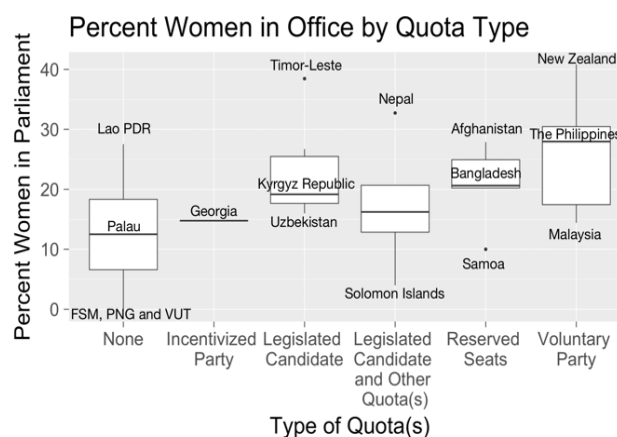
⁴ Vanuatu National Review on Beijing+25, available at Asia-Pacific Portal for Gender Equality, Country Reviews, [www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Vanuatu%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Vanuatu%20(English).pdf).

Policy recommendations

Fund incentivized party quotas

The idea of incentivizing party reform has been receiving traction globally as a way to encourage parties to nominate women and eventually get them elected (Wright, 2019). With political parties being a major influencer (UNDP, 2014), governments could consider funding incentivized party quotas. In Georgia, political parties receive 30 percent more funding if they have at least 30 percent of each gender in the first 10 names on their party list. Additionally, parties that successfully nominate and get a woman candidate elected receive additional funding (IDEA, 2018). Georgia has a higher women’s representation in Parliament than the median of countries without any quota systems (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Percent Women in Office by Quota Type



Source: ESCAP calculations based on IPU Parline (accessed 12 July 2019). See <https://data.ipu.org/>.

⁵ The Kyrgyz Republic National Review on Beijing+25, available at Asia-Pacific Portal for Gender Equality, Country Reviews, [www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kyrgyzstan%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kyrgyzstan%20(English).pdf).

Create enabling environment for voluntary party quotas

Countries in the region that have voluntary party quotas, such as Australia, the Philippines and New Zealand, are well above the regional average for women's parliamentary representation, as shown in Figure 3. In order to create an enabling environment for voluntary party quotas, governments can make official statements that encourage parties to enact quotas internally.

In Kazakhstan, the Central Election Commission and the National Commission for Women's Affairs, Family and Demographic Policies under the President had "endorsed special recommendations for political parties to have gender quotas in their charters or give consideration to a gender perspective when making the party list of candidates and nominating candidates for elected office."⁶

Enact legislated candidate quotas and reserved seats

Governments might consider quotas through direct means such as reserved seats or legislated candidate quotas. In India, the one-third seat reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions helped elect one million women to government positions (Chowdhury, 2013). After introducing gender quotas, countries like Afghanistan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, the Kyrgyz Republic, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu all saw increases in parliamentary and/or local government representation (True and others, 2014). It is important to note that even the country with the lowest proportion of women in parliament with a legislated candidate quota (i.e., Uzbekistan) still has a higher proportion of women than over 80 percent of the countries that have no quotas (see Figure 3).

That said, quotas are not necessarily enough and can often paint a skewed picture. In Nepal, where women were in an unprecedented 40.9 percent of seats after the 2017 local elections, many women indicated that they had financial and management challenges and needed more training for political governance (Australian Government DFAT – TAF Partnership on Subnational Governance in Nepal, 2018). While quotas are an important start, they have to be complemented with other gender-responsive programming to make political institutions viable for women; this programming might include financial training, childcare, maternity and paternity leave, mentoring and networking opportunities.

Support women's leadership development programmes

Out of the 41 countries that submitted comprehensive reports for the Asia-Pacific Regional Beijing +25 Conference, 15 had indicated that they encouraged the participation of minority and young women through sensitization and mentorship programmes; 20 responded that they had provided opportunities for mentorship, training in leadership, decision-making, public speaking, self-assertion and/or political campaigning.⁷

The report on women's transformative leadership by ESCAP explains best practices of leadership training programmes from Asia and the Pacific: some of these best practices include local ownership of the programmes; collective approaches; associational engagement; and coordination with other international partners (ESCAP, 2019). The report describes specific "pathways" in which women's transformative leadership develops: 1) growing consciousness and capabilities, 2) accessing resources and opportunities, 3) shaping and leveraging formal policies, and 4) transforming exclusionary norms.

⁶ Kazakhstan National Review on Beijing+25 (Russian), available at Asia-Pacific Portal for Gender Equality, Country Reviews, [www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kazakhstan_\(Russian\).pdf](http://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kazakhstan_(Russian).pdf).

⁷ ESCAP calculations based on national reviews on Beijing 25+ submitted by 41 ESCAP member states and associate members.

Creating a gender-responsive policy environment

Even after implementing measures for women's equal participation, governments should consider long-term responsive evaluation processes. For example, the Kyrgyz Republic, after realizing that parties would "oust" women from political parties after meeting electoral gender, had created a new amendment that would ensure that ousted women parliamentarians would be replaced by other women.⁸ Thus, parties could no longer "bypass" the gender quotas.

In another case, the Republic of Korea, after realizing a hostile media landscape for women, created a plan to promote "prompt monitoring of gender discrimination by opening an on-line forum where citizens can participate and report gender-discriminatory media contents."⁹ In both cases with the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Korea, the governments were able to respond to the ways that norms percolated in the environment and could respond with gender-responsive policies.

⁸ The Kyrgyz Republic National Review on Beijing+25, available at Asia-Pacific Portal for Gender Equality, Country Reviews. Available at [www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kyrgyzstan%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Kyrgyzstan%20(English).pdf).

⁹ Republic of Korea National Review on Beijing 25+, available at Asia-Pacific Portal for Gender Equality, Country Reviews. Available at [www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Republic%20of%20Korea%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.asiapacificgender.org/sites/default/files/documents/Republic%20of%20Korea%20(English).pdf)

References

Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) – The Asia Foundation (TAF) Partnership on Subnational Governance in Nepal (2018). Nepal's locally elected women representatives: Exploratory study of needs and capacity.

Beaman, Lori, and others (2012). Female Leadership Raises aspirations and educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India. Science. Available at www.sciencemag.org/.

Burns, Nancy, Schlozman, Kay L. and Verba, Sidney (2001). *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Chowdhury, F. (2013). Women's Participation in Local Governments in Bangladesh and India. In *The Impact of Women's Political Leadership on Democracy and Development*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.14217/9781848591677-6-en>.

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and UN Women (2012). Opportunities and Challenges of Women's Political Participation in India.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (2018). *Gender-targeted Public Funding for Political Parties*. Stockholm.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2018). Women do 4 times more unpaid care work than men in Asia and the Pacific, 27 June.

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) New Parline, Open Data Platform. Available from <https://data.ipu.org/>.

_____ (2016). Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians. Geneva.

Markham, Susan (2013). *Women as Agents of Change: Having Voice in Society and Influencing Policy*. Women's Voice, Agency, and Participation Research Series, No. 5. The World Bank.

O'Neil, Tam, Georgia Plank and Pilar Domingo (2015). *Literature review: Support to women and girls' leadership: A rapid review of the evidence*. London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Tadros, Mariz ed. (2014) *Women in Politics: Gender, Power and Development*. London: Zed Books.

Teele, Dawn, Joshua Kalla, and Frances Rosenbluth (2018). The Ties That Double Bind: Social Roles and Women's Underrepresentation in Politics. *American Political Science Review*, vol. 112, issue 3, pp. 525-541.

True, Jacqui and others (2014). Women's Participation in Asia and the Pacific. Social Science Research Council: Working papers. Conflict and Peace Forum.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2014). *Gender Equality Women's participation and leadership in governments at the local level Asia and the Pacific 2013*. Bangkok.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) (2019). *Pathways to Influence: Promoting the Role of Women's Transformative Leadership to Achieve the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific*.

World Economic Forum (WEF) (2017). *Global Gender Gap Report*. Available at www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf.

World Values Survey (WVS) (2014). World Values Survey Online Analysis Tool; Wave 6: 2010-2014. Available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp.

Wright, Teresa (2019) Cash incentives for parties could help get more women in politics: MPs, April 12. Retrieved from www.cbc.ca/news/politics/incentives-for-women-in-politics-1.5096660.