



[ADRN Online Seminar] Democracy Cooperation Series 12: Gender Parity in Asia

Voices for Young Women's Better Future: Stand Together for Gender Parity

East Asia Institute (EAI)

I. Overview

Gender equality is essential in achieving human rights, sustainable development, and democracy. As a result of decades of legal and structural improvements, today, more girls have the opportunity to obtain a better education, more women work freely with fairer pay, and more women participate in politics. Despite this, female girls and women continue to face barriers to socioeconomic possibilities, female leaders are underrepresented at decision-making tables, and femicides and other types of violence against women are on the rise.

The Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN) vowed once again to exchange ideas and expertise on this crucial subject by exploring solutions to break the glass ceiling and empower women in order to establish stronger voices for young women's better future. During the first session, panelists from India, Indonesia, and Mongolia shared their perspectives on the legal and institutional hurdles to gender equality in their respective countries. During the second session, panelists from Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand discussed country-specific procedures and obstacles in breaking the glass ceiling and empowering women.

II. Legal and Institutional Barriers for Gender Parity

India

“History of Feminist Movements, Partially Successful (...) Ideological Institutions, Lagging Behind”

Regarding institutions, there are three categories in general: political institutions, economic institutions, and ideological institutions. Although all these institutions have failed to fully realize gender equality, the history of feminist movements has been somewhat successful in addressing the issue of gender equality in both political and economic institutions. Public policies and laws that failed to protect the rights of girls and women were replaced by new systems which are more female-friendly. Nevertheless, the ideological institution's achievement was relatively poor. What is meant by ideological institutions is referred to the perception, norms, and preferred identities of women that limit and challenge the rights of women.

Women's roles were primarily limited in particular industries, such as (child)care, due to patriarchal attitudes, which instilled incorrect gender ideals in the young. Despite the country's great economic growth, only a few privileged women benefited from the improvements for gender parity, while the majority of the population continues to struggle with low unemployment and unpaid or ignored care jobs.



In this scenario, one option is to assist women to do well their responsibilities by enacting new rules and service provisions rather than erecting barriers. For example, on the topic of women's safety when working at night, it is better to develop the policing system and increase public transit services rather than preventing women from working late. The most crucial component, though, will be the genuine public appreciation of women's efforts and rights.

Indonesia

“One Step More from the Achievement in the Late 1990s Democratization Period”

Despite the efforts of civil society organizations and government agencies, Indonesia has a poor record on gender parity, according to the Global Gender Gap. A significant improvement in women's political and economic engagement, particularly in the public and government sectors, is needed in the country. However, the country has consistently demonstrated enormous educational potential and has had an excellent experience following democratization in the late 1990s.

Democratization led to the institutionalization of Human Rights within a country. Thanks to that, the percentage of women's participation in politics has never been better with the election of the first female president (Megawati Sukarnoputri) and many sub-provincial level party leaders. In addition, a special Women's Commission born out of the 1998 democracy movements convened a committee that reported the Ministry of Human Rights hundreds of discriminative laws against women and pointed out changes to be made to achieve gender parity within the country in terms of protecting Human Rights.

Recently, however, the conservatism has returned, and many discourses such as ‘how women should dress’ or ‘how women's body should be regulated in a public space’ are on the rise, shaking the country's erstwhile efforts to build a foundation for gender parity. The trends of conservatism also permeate not only the physical spaces but also the online spheres where uncivilized narratives on women's roles or bodies take place. Against this backdrop, there is a huge desire to legalize laws to end sexual discrimination, which activates heated debates inside and outside the parliament.

Mongolia

“COVID-driven Challenges against Women's Empowerment (...) Public Participation is a KEY”

In Mongolia, stereotypes against women is not new. The country is home to a unique mix of nomadic and secular cultures. One-third of the population lives in the countryside, and such lifestyles have an impact on domestic violence, children's rights to education, and people's willingness to participate in politics and be aware of gender parity concerns. However, the country's gender parity score was not out of control until the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) era. After 2015, the situation began to shift. The percentage of women in positions of authority and decision-making was significantly lower than the worldwide and regional averages. Furthermore, while gender parity, which incorporates concerns of (economic) rights and opportunities for women, is a demanding prerequisite for the country's better future, it is worth highlighting that power representation is not solely about gender inequity.

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, new problems are posed with regards to gender parity. In Mongolia, the health and education sectors are highly occupied by women: 82% of the health care workers are women and over 80% of the workers in the education sectors are also women. This is often called a “reverse gender gap. During the pandemic, health workers became very busy and ended up overworked and negligent of their household duties. Before the pandemic, women could also expect promotion and career achievements in the private sector. However, such practices have also changed during the pandemic. Many companies and schools faced with difficulties, ended up shutting down. Given that almost 40% of the private sectors in Mongolia were led by women, the COVID-driven changes can be seen as challenges against women's empowerment.

Despite these structural and contemporary challenges, to effectively achieve gender parity, the country is asked to devise more opportunities for public participation and engagement. Before the government's decision-making on a number of policies, it is important to exchange viewpoints between



different groups of people, so that the government can refer to those viewpoints to ensure better gender-equal policies.

III. Breaking the Glass-Ceiling and Empowering Women

Japan

“Gender Stereotypes Let Male as well as Female Suffer”

Recent Japanese politics statistics show that the ‘gender and politics in Japan’ discourse is rapidly increasing. Compared to the previous election, there are more women seated at the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly (5 to 41 out of 127), more women candidates in leadership positions at the ruling LDP (0 to 2 out of 4), and a decrease of constituencies where women have never run for elections for the house of representatives in Japan. This can be said to be partially due to the Global Gender Gap Report that ranked Japan 120th in the category of “female politicians.” Nevertheless, there is still much room for improvement, including the matter of establishing gender parity at the political leadership level.

Japan's gender parity-friendly activities were also hindered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The daily lives of regular people have changed as the country's economy has been severely impacted by the outbreak. More single-parent homes have been finding it difficult to financially support their families, resulting in decreased attention to gender equality issues. When isolation within a community or between people is put into place to prevent the spread of the virus, it is difficult to strengthen relationships and raise voices of solidarity. Furthermore, compared to pre-COVID-19, more strain was put on women for childcare duties.

When discussing women’s economic opportunities and the glass-ceiling issue, whether or not “women can work like men” is often asked. It is crucial to note that this question overlooks the fact that gender parity is an issue of responsibility for both women and men. Taking the aforementioned point into consideration, it is clear that gender parity affects all. A point argued by the UN during the #HeforShe solidarity movement. In order to fully realize gender parity, not only must the women’s perspective be emphasized, but men’s perspective (i.e. the burden to become the standard “competent breadwinner”) must be recognized as well.

Taiwan

“Maternal Wall Let Young Women Be Overwhelmed”

For young Taiwanese women, the gender gap in the workplace is the most difficult obstacle to overcome. They are up against 'the maternity wall,' which prevents pregnant women, working mothers, and even women of childbearing age from pursuing careers. Women's labor force participation in Taiwan has a pattern of steadily declining after the peak working age of 25 to 29 years old.

Gender preconceptions about women's roles in their families are one of the most critical variables associated with the maternal wall. Women are expected to take time off after giving birth to care for their children and to perform domestic labor without being compensated. These preconceptions lead to barriers in re-entering the workforce. However, when women's access to higher education increased in the late 1990s, stereotypes underwent a new phase. However, in the field of education, the percentage of women pursuing advanced degrees remains small. Despite their collective educational achievements, women's work options remain confined to the service and sales sectors, as well as lower- to middle-level white-collar positions.

Parental leave was adopted in 2019 to empower women and dilute patriarchal tendencies in the country, and the Acts of Gender Equality in Employment has started to receive more attention. Specific sections such as "prohibition of gender discrimination," "prevention and correction of sexual



harassment," and "steps to promote equality in employment," for example, established the groundwork for legal instruments that can affect non-legal instruments on the gender parity issue.

Thailand

“Relatively High Proportion of Female Executive (...) Still, Establishing Supportive Environment is Vital”

Demographically, there are more women than men in Thailand. However, statistics show that the country is suffering from gender inequality. For example, although the average education level of women has increased over the years, it is still less than the level of men. Women's economic participation is limited and even though they are in the job market, they still receive less payment than men with the same occupation. 91.94% of violence victims are women, and 67.5% of women still bear the responsibility of birth control.

At the decision-making level, especially in domestic politics, there is a significantly lower percentage of female politicians (e.g. 15.7% of MP, 10.4% of the Senate, 11.1% of the Cabinet). The number is lower in the local governmental sectors. However, in the business sectors, it is estimated that 32% of the executive staff is female. Compared to the other countries in Asia, 32% is a relatively high number. This has to do with the following business structures of Thailand: 1) prevalent family business system which enables women to take the decision-making role, 2) the country has many SMEs with female entrepreneurs, and 3) international policies for better inclusion and diversity plays an important role within the country.

However, the glass-ceiling problem is still firmly rooted in the country, which requires a more supportive environment for gender parity. Elimination of gender stereotypes within families, educational institutions, and media is a must. Considering the contemporary trends of digitalization, building an environment with a life-long education including digital media literacy education is considered to be an important aspect. Additionally, introducing childcare services and parental leave system, equipping offices with breastfeeding rooms, and effectively utilizing the Gender Equality Act (2015) is important as well. Above all, an agency-level of national coordination should be implemented with the help of the Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development and the Ministry of Development and Human Security. ■

Acknowledgment

The ADRN sends a message of support to young women working to create gender-balanced societies. As a change-maker and doer, we can make a difference together.



Speakers and Moderators Biographies

- **Ayako Kobayashi** is an assistant professor of the Department of Global Studies, Sophia University. Her research interests and teaching areas are international politics, peace and conflict studies, international organizations, and global governance. She received her Ph.D. in Law from Hitotsubashi University. She was a former research fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center, and a former program advisor at the Cabinet Office, Government of Japan.
- **Irine Hiraswari Gayatri** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Gender, Peace and Security (GPS) Centre, School of Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, supported by an Australia Award Scholarship. She is also a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Political Studies, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI). Irine obtained her MA from the Department of Peace & Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden, in August 2005. In September & November 2017, she participated in regional forums facilitated by UN Women & UNODC in Bangkok to discuss the formulation of a national plan of action on countering and preventing violent extremism (P-CVE). From 2017-2018, Irine joined a small team led by the National Counter Terrorism Agency in developing the draft for National Action Plan on Countering/ Preventing Violent Extremism in Indonesia. Between 2007 to 2014 together with the Coalition of Anti Gender-Based Violence, she supported the adoption of UNSCR 1325 into Indonesia's National Action Plan.
- **Kaustuv K Bandyopadhyay** is the director of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a pioneer CSO, who has dedicated more than three decades to work on participation, democratic governance, and civil society development. He has twenty-five years of professional experience working with universities, research institutions, and CSOs. He serves on the Steering Committee of the Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN) and the Asia Democracy Network (ADN). He holds a Ph.D. degree in anthropology for his work with the Parhaiya tribes of Chotanagpur in India.
- **Malancha Chakrabarty** is a Fellow at the Climate Change and Development Initiative. Her research interests encompass issues related to economic and social development in Africa and India, and the links between climate change, agriculture, and food security. She is currently working on a project which explores India's trade, investment, and development cooperation with African countries. Dr. Chakrabarty is published widely in international journals like the Review of African Political Economy and the World Review of Political Economy. She is also a regular contributor to newspapers such as Asian Age and DNA.
- **Perada Phumessawatdi** is a government official at the Department of Women's Affairs and Family Development where she works on formulating policies and plans on gender equality promotion and women's empowerment. At an international level, she worked as the secretariat to the ASEAN Working Group for Drafting Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women. She also served as a secretary to the Chair of the 59th session of the UN Commission on the Status on Women. Her research interest is on mainstreaming a gender perspective into policies and practice, policy transfer and translation, and women's rights. She graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Social Administration and a Master's degree in English for Careers from Thammasat University, Thailand. She also holds an MSc in Gender and International Relations and a Ph.D. in Social Policy from the University of Bristol, UK.



- **Sook Jong Lee** is a Professor of Public Administration at Sungkyunkwan University and Senior Fellow of the East Asia Institute. She has been directing the Asian Democracy Research Network since its formation in 2015, leading a network of about nineteen research organizations across Asia to promote democracy with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. Her recent publications include *Populism in Asian Democracies: Features, Structures, and Impacts* (eds. 2021), *National Identity of South Koreans: Trends of the Past 15 Years* (eds. 2020), *Collaborative Governance in East Asia: Evolution Towards Multi-stakeholder Partnerships* (eds. 2020), *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (ed. 2016), and *Keys to Successful Presidency in South Korea* (ed. 2013 and 2016).

- **Tegshbayar Darambazar** holds an MSc, is a lawyer, and a researcher specializing in anti-money laundering and financial crimes compliance. She has experience working for the government, private sector companies, and civil society organizations and conducting research on AML, transparency and accountability, public participation, right to information, etc. A former Asia Global Fellow in HK, Ms.D.Tegshbayar now serves as a consultant to international organizations worldwide, including the Transparency International Mongolia and the Brookings Institution of the U.S., and teaches at the University of Finance and Economics.

- **Wei-ting Wu** is an assistant professor at the Graduate Institute for Gender Studies at Shih Hsin University. She received her Ph.D. from the Department of Political Science at the City University of New York. Her research areas include social movement, gender politics, and state-society relations.



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