



A Comparative Survey of

***DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT***

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Gender Equality in Political Empowerment  
in Southeast Asia

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# **Asian Barometer**

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

## **Working Paper Series**

Jointly Published by

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Gender Equality in Political Empowerment in Southeast Asia

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### Abstract

Using data from the Asian Barometer Surveys, the paper examines the state of gender equality in political empowerment across Southeast Asian countries. Research has shown that politically-empowering women lead to better economic opportunities for women, contributing to economic progress and in human development as a whole. The political empowerment of women is usually measured at the macro level by representation in the legislature or government. Using representation as an indicator of gender equality in political empowerment, however, has its limitations. Representation quotas may be more of a function of a policy than a manifestation of public preference for increased participation of women in political decision-making. Representation may also be more of a result of a woman's electability or to access political leadership. But what is the actual situation at the individual level? Do women actually participate in elections? Do they even follow news on politics and government, or discuss political matters with other people? Have they done any grassroots-level civic-and-political engagement? Do they feel that they have the ability to participate in politics or should they leave the arena of politics and governance to people in the government? The paper seeks to answer these questions using cross-national survey data to examine the state of gender equality (or gender gap) in political empowerment among the publics in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The paper will utilize available data from the four waves of the Asian Barometer Surveys.

*Keywords:* Political participation, women, Southeast Asia

### **Gender Equality in Political Empowerment in Southeast Asia**

The importance of women's equal access to and full participation in all "spheres of the society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power" was affirmed by the United Nations and by extension its member-states, during the *Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace*, held in Beijing in September 1995. The resulting conference document, *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, signaled international commitment to achieve gender equality and the empowerment and advancement of women.

Since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration, various institutions and scholars have developed mechanisms to measure the political empowerment of women. In particular, the use proportion of women in national parliament has become the de facto indicator of gender equality in political empowerment of women. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index uses as indicators of Political Empowerment the share of women who have seats in parliament (or legislature) and at ministerial levels, and number of years of a female head of state in the last 50 years. The Human Development Index has a Gender Inequality Index (GII) component that measures an empowerment dimension using two indicators: the share of parliamentary seats held by each sex, and access to higher education. Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women) likewise specifies two indicators to monitor progress, including the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to further the MDG target to "ensure women's full and effective participation". Estes (2010) likewise considers seats in parliament held by women in the Women status subindex of the weighted index of social progress (WISP).

If the minimum indicator of “political empowerment” of women is the widely accepted use of the number of women legislators, modern-day history of the region suggests Southeast Asian women political leaders done more than shattered the glass ceiling of political empowerment. After all, Southeast Asians have elected five women political leaders to top political executive positions, e.g., presidents or prime ministers, in the last 30 years. To put that in context, Americans have yet to have a woman president, and the British have only two women Prime Ministers. In 2016, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was appointed State Counsellor, a de facto Prime Minister, joining the list of Southeast Asia women who have held top political leadership roles in the past 30 years – Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand, and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia. In turn, these modern-day women political leaders are in addition to the many women who ruled pre-colonial Southeast Asian kingdoms and territories (Reid, 1998; Reid, 2003).

But there are clear limitations to using macro-level representation in political institutions as an indicator of gender equality in political empowerment. Iwanaga (2008) noted the paradox, in that despite the election of these “tiny elite of highly educated women”, women are still underrepresented in legislative bodies, considering that women comprise half of the region’s population. Although the share of women legislators has significantly increased in some countries, the regional average is much lower than the levels in economically developed states. Thus, women legislators have been reduced as the “symbolic purpose of gender equality” in political empowerment. It is also evident that the five women elected to the highest political positions are close relatives of former male leaders, either as daughters, widows or sister. Their rise to power were nothing more than continuation of a political dynasties (Amirell, 2012) or their familial power lines (Richter, 1990).

Another limitation of using representation in legislature as an indicator of gender equality in political empowerment is that it does not provide a meaningful comparison of authoritarian and democratic countries (Beer 2009). Naturally, political institutions in authoritarian countries would not have the same decision-making influence as those in democratic countries. Secondly, representation would most likely indicate capability to be elected to a political institution or to access to political leadership to be appointed to high-level government positions. The UNDP's HDI-based measurements are also criticized for its complexity to calculate and interpret (Bardhan and Klasen 1999; Betteta, 2006; Klasen 2006), and its interconnection with human development. Furthermore, complex aggregate indexes such as the Global Gender Gap Index often results in one indicator overpowering another indicator (Beer 2009).

Just as women's empowerment is multidimensional (Oxaal and Baden, 1997; Moghadam and Senftova, 2005; Malhotra, Schuler and Boender, 2002), the sub-dimension of political empowerment has also multiple components, and not just limited to women representation in legislation. Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002) identified the commonly used indicators of the political dimension of women empowerment in the household, community and broader arenas. Note that in their typology, representation is just one sub-component of political empowerment:

Dimension	Household	Community	Broader Arenas
Political	Knowledge of political system and means of access to it; domestic support for political engagement; exercising the right to vote	Women's involvement or mobilization in the local political system/campaigns; support for specific candidates or legislation; representation in local bodies of government	Women's representation in regional and national bodies of government; strength as a voting bloc; representation of women's interests in effective lobbies and interest groups

Adapted from Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002)

Cognizant of the limitations of the use of macro-level indicators to measure gender equality in political empowerment, the paper therefore considers the use cross-country survey data to examine the state of gender equality in political empowerment in Southeast Asia. Using cross-national survey is not a new approach in measuring gender equality in political empowerment, and political participation (see Hayes and Bean 1993; Inglehart, 2000; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Jennings, 1983; Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978; Paxton and Kunovich, 2003; Vassallo, 2006). These studies, however, were largely focused on Western democracies. The paper instead will focus on Southeast Asian cross-country comparison. It seeks to contribute to the growing literature on the study of contemporary Southeast Asian history of women and gender.

Elsewhere, Burns, Scholzman and Verba (2001) cited the advantages of using representative surveys to examine gender equality or gaps in equality in political participation. This paper's use of survey data to study gender equality in political empowerment is also in line with the suggestion of Beteta (2006) to use surveys, including cross-national research, to collect and analyze statistical indicators of women's political empowerment at the household level.

In this paper we attempt to examine what is the status of gender equality in terms of political empowerment in Southeast Asia. The paper seeks to examine what is the actual situation of women political empowerment at the individual level? Do women actually participate in elections? Do they even follow news on politics and government, or still discuss political matters with other people? Have they done any grassroots-level civic-and-political engagement? Most importantly, do they feel that they have the ability to participate in politics or should they leave the arena of politics and governance to people in the government?



## Data and Measures

### Data

The analysis is based on the merged data of four waves of the Asian Barometer Surveys conducted from 2002 to 2015 in eight Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The Asian Barometer (ABS) is an applied research program on public opinion on political values, democracy, and governance around the region. The regional network encompasses research teams from thirteen East Asian political systems and five South Asian countries.

For purposes of analysis, the eight countries were divided into three typologies of democratic regimes (see Schedler, 2006). Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines are *liberal democracies*. Four countries are *electoral authoritarian* regimes: Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar. Vietnam remains the sole *authoritarian* regime.

### Measures

In this paper, political empowerment will be measured based on four dimensions: electoral participation, civic engagement, psychological involvement, and political efficacy. The specific question items are as follows:

- a) Electoral participation
  - Voted in the last national elections (Q33)
  - Attended a campaign meeting or rally (Q35)
  - Persuaded others to vote for a certain political candidate or party (Q36)
  - Help out or work for a party or candidate running (Q37)
  
- b) Civic engagement
  - Contacted government (administrative) official (Q64)
  - Contacted elected officials or legislative representatives at any level (Q65)
  - Contacted officials at higher level (Q66)
  - Contacted traditional leaders/community leaders (Q67)
  - Contacted other influential people outside the government (Q68)
  - Contacted news media (Q69)
  - Got together with others to try to resolve local problems (Q70)

- c) Psychological Involvement
  - Interest in politics (Q44)
  - Following news on politics and the government (Q45)
  - Discuss political matters with family or friends (Q47)
  - Agree/Disagree: Women should not be involved in politics as much as men (Q132)
  
- d) Political Efficacy
  - Agree/Disagree: I think I have the ability to participate in politics (Q126)
  - Agree/Disagree: Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on (Q127)
  - Agree/Disagree: People like me don't have any influence over what the government does (Q128)<sup>1</sup>
  - Agree/Disagree: You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right (Q129)
  - Agree/Disagree: Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions (Q134)

As most variables utilized in the analysis are in the ordinal scale—they have ranks or presumed to have ranks from highest to lowest or vice-versa—a statistical measure called Gamma (G) was used to measure the strength and direction of the association. Gamma coefficients range from  $-1.00$  to  $+1.00$ , with values  $+1.00$  and  $-1.00$  expressing perfect positive and negative association, respectively, between two variables. In turn, coefficients of  $0.00$  indicate the absence of association. For this paper, correlation coefficients considered statistically significant are those significant at the 95% confidence level or higher. A non-significant gamma value (that is, absence of association) indicates that there is no significant difference in the responses of men and women (indicated n.s. [not significant]) – to some extent indicating gender equality for a particular variable.

A negative sign preceding the gamma value indicates that women are more likely than men, for example, to be interested in politics or to have a favorable opinion of women in

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<sup>1</sup> As the question is negatively worded, the responses were recoded to be harmonized with positively-worded test statements on political efficacy.

government. Conversely, a positive gamma value indicates a gender gap, which means that, for example, men are more likely than females to participate in elections.

## Results

### Electoral Participation

As shown in Table 1, voting in elections is a universal in the three liberal democracy countries, as well as in Malaysia and Cambodia. In Myanmar, however, there were more women who have voted (-0.15,  $p < 0.1$ ). There is a mild gender gap in Vietnam (0.22,  $p < .001$ ), as slightly more men than women voted in national elections.

On the issue of participating in election-related activities, women were more passive participants than men, as there are generally more men than women who have attended a campaign rally, persuaded others to vote for a candidate or party, or helped out or worked for a party or candidate running. Notably, the differences in participating in these activities were observed in all countries, to some extent. The largest differences are for helping or working for a candidate or party, and attending a campaign meeting or rally.

### Civic Engagement

On the aspect of civic engagement, significant gender differences were observed for almost all activities in all countries, except for Singapore, indicating men were more likely than women to have done the civic activities. In Singapore, no significant gaps were observed in the proportion of men and women who have done the civic activities.

Table 2 shows that large significant differences were particularly observed for men in Myanmar (0.70,  $p < .001$ ) and Cambodia (0.61,  $p < .001$ ) who have contacted news media. Indonesian men were also more likely to have contacted either elected officials (0.52,  $p < .001$ ) or high level government officials (0.41,  $p < .001$ ) than the publics in other countries.

### **Psychological Involvement**

Interest in politics was equally high among men and women in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Nevertheless, in Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam, men were more interested in politics than women. Interest is stronger among men in Myanmar (0.36,  $p < .001$ ). The results are shown in Table 3.

Gender differences were observed in all countries for following news on politics and government, and discussing political matters with family and friends. In particular, the gap is more pronounced in Cambodia and Myanmar, two electoral authoritarian system, as well as in authoritarian Vietnam.

On the matter of whether “women should not be involved in politics as much as men”, men and women in Indonesia and Thailand have no significant differences in opinion. Negative gamma values were observed in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, indicative of stronger support among women than men for women to be involved in politics. In Myanmar (+0.25,  $p < .001$ ) and Cambodia (+0.17,  $p < .001$ ), there were more men than women who disagreed with the notion that women should not be involved in politics.

### **Political Efficacy**

Table 4 shows that on the five items on political efficacy, men were more likely than women to believe in their ability to participate in politics, while women were more likely to feel inadequate to understand complicated politics and government, and to influence the government. Women were also more likely to trust government leaders and the people who run the government.

It is notable that in the Philippines and Thailand, liberal democracies who have had women presidents or prime minister, there were no significant differences observed among men

and women for all measures of political efficiency, indicating that women felt as politically efficient as the men.

The belief that they have the ability to participate in politics is stronger among men than women in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam.

However, there were more women than men in all four electoral authoritarian countries, as well as in Vietnam and Indonesia, who felt that politics and government seems so complicated for them to understand. The difference is worse for Myanmar (-0.43,  $p < .001$ ) than in other countries.

The women in Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore and Vietnam likewise felt that people like themselves do not have any influence over what the government does. Again, the difference is worse for Myanmar (-0.31,  $p < .001$ ) than in other countries.

The women in three electoral authoritarian countries, Malaysia, Myanmar and Cambodia, were more likely than men to defer to government leaders to decide for the country, as negative gamma values were observed on the statement “government leaders are like the head of a family, we should all follow their decisions.” At the same time, women in Malaysia, Cambodia and Singapore were more likely than men to say that they trust the people in government to do what is right.

### **Concluding Observations**

The preliminary analysis of the Asian Barometer Survey data indicates that while there are variations between and within countries, the general trend is that there are significant gender differences in political empowerment of women in the region.

Women are significantly more passive than men when it comes to electoral participation, civic engagement and psychological involvement. This is essentially in line with the expectations

that women are more disadvantaged to participate or to be engaged in politics because of situation and structural barriers (Jennings, 1983; Mestre and Marin, 2012; Verba, Burns and Schlozman, 1997). A case in point is the significant gender differences in participating in election activities other than voting, which requires minimum amount of time resources spent. Attending campaign rallies and helping candidates are activities that would require women to spend more time outside of the home. For women with family responsibilities, these activities would apply more stress to their family demands. Similarly, contacting elected or high level officials would require minimum social capital or networks.

On the matter of political efficiency, the women are significantly less politically efficient than men. In particular, women are more likely than men to feel inadequate to understand as complicated as politics and government, and to influence government decisions. That significant differences were observed in electoral authoritarian regimes and authoritarian regimes indicate that the prevailing regime may have some impact on feelings of political efficiency. Note also that women in authoritarian and electoral authoritarian regimes are more likely than men to defer decision-making to government leaders. In contrast, no significant differences were observed for all measures of political efficiency among men and women in Philippines and Thailand, two liberal countries who have had had women presidents or prime minister.

Given these findings, the next step in the research would be to conduct further analysis of in-country differences, such as age, educational attainment. It is possible that the gender differences may not all be attributable to differences between men and women, but to differences among women within the prevailing socio-economic environments and political culture in their respective countries.

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## Tables

Table 1

*Comparison of Electoral Participation Among Men and Women in Southeast Asia (Gamma Values)*

	Voted in the last national elections	Attended a campaign meeting or rally	Persuaded others to vote for a certain political candidate or party	Help out or work for a party or candidate running
<i>Democracies</i>				
Indonesia	n.s.	0.29***	0.29***	0.45***
Philippines	n.s.	0.09**	0.11**	0.23***
Thailand	n.s.	0.12***	n.s.	0.15**
<i>Electoral authoritarian</i>				
Cambodia	n.s.	n.s.	0.23**	0.28***
Malaysia	0.10*	0.39***	0.32***	0.43***
Myanmar	-0.15**	0.28**	n.s.	0.45**
Singapore	n.s.	0.24***	n.s.	n.s.
<i>Authoritarian</i>				
Vietnam	0.22***	0.12***	n.s.	n.s.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; n.s. = not significant

Table 2

*Comparison of Civic Engagement Among Men and Women in Southeast Asia (Gamma Values)*

	Contacted government (administrative) official	Contacted elected officials or legislative representatives at any level	Contacted officials at higher level	Contacted traditional leaders/community leaders	Contacted other influential people outside the government	Contacted news media	Got together with others to try to resolve local problems
<i>Democracies</i>							
Indonesia	0.28***	0.52***	0.41***	0.28***	n.s.	0.48***	0.34***
Philippines	0.17***	0.11*	0.09*	n.s.	n.s.	0.21**	0.12**
Thailand	0.13***	0.11***	0.16**	0.10**	n.s.	0.23***	0.12**
<i>Electoral authoritarian</i>							
Cambodia	0.15*	0.24***	0.38***	0.12**	0.10*	0.61***	0.36***
Malaysia	0.36***	0.27***	0.32***	0.26***	0.10*	0.39***	0.39***
Myanmar	--	0.34**	0.28**	0.27***	0.17*	0.70***	0.19***
Singapore	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
<i>Authoritarian</i>							
Vietnam	0.47***	0.26***	0.15**	0.19***	0.12**	n.s.	0.22***

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; n.s. = not significant

Table 3

*Results of Gamma Correlations on the Psychological Involvement Among Men and Women*

	Interest in politics	Following news on politics and the government	Discuss political matters with family or friends	Women should not be involved in politics as much as men
<i>Democracies</i>				
Indonesia	.12***	0.24***	0.29***	n.s.
Philippines	n.s.	0.11***	0.14***	-0.15**
Thailand	n.s.	0.19***	0.06*	n.s.
<i>Electoral authoritarian</i>				
Cambodia	0.20***	0.38***	0.33***	0.17**
Malaysia	n.s.	0.13***	0.19***	-0.10*
Myanmar	0.36***	0.37***	0.35***	+0.25***
Singapore	n.s.	0.14***	0.11**	-0.18**
<i>Authoritarian</i>				
Vietnam	0.15***	0.27***	0.41***	-0.15**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; n.s. = not significant

Table 3

*Comparison of the Political Efficacy Among Men and Women in Southeast Asia (Gamma Values)*

	I think I have the ability to participate in politics	Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on	People like me don't have any influence over what the government does	Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions	You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right
<i>Democracies</i>					
Indonesia	0.23***	-0.15***	-0.12**	n.s.	n.s.
Philippines	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Thailand	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
<i>Electoral authoritarian</i>					
Cambodia	n.s.	-0.24***	-0.18***	-0.13***	-0.11**
Malaysia	0.22***	-0.22***	n.s.	-0.11**	-0.07***
Myanmar	0.39***	-0.43***	-0.31**	-0.18	n.s.
Singapore	0.18***	-0.23***	-0.10*	n.s.	-0.15**
<i>Authoritarian</i>					
Vietnam	0.33***	-0.29***	-0.13**	n.s.	n.s.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; n.s. = not significant

