

Women in Local Government in Asia and the Pacific

A comparative analysis of thirteen countries

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Last year the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific initiated a project to record the status of women in local government in this region. It had become clear that the role of women in the governance of their communities needed to be documented and the factors that helped and hindered their involvement identified. Women from several countries in this region were invited to be part of this project. All country reporters were asked to provide indepth analysis of factors that helped and hindered women's participation and access to decision-making positions in local government. There were also asked to do some research on the impact women leaders are having on local government.

The information collected has been drawn together to provide a picture of women's involvement in local government in the Asia and Pacific region for this summit in order to provide a basis for discussion. This comparative analysis is based on 13 country reports and it highlights continuing barriers to women's involvement in local government; initiatives that have increased women's participation; and the transformative leadership that women provide in local government. It also outlines regional and country-level strategies for increasing women's involvement in local government.

This comparative analysis is based on country reports from the following 13 countries:

- South Asia: Sri-Lanka, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh
- South East Asia: Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines
- East Asia and the Pacific: China, Vietnam, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

As workshops at this summit are organised within sub-regional groupings, this report presents much of the data within these sub-regions to ensure ease of access to information that is specific to each country or sub-region.

The information collected is presented under four headings:

1. The Current Situation
2. Factors that Affect Women's Involvement in Local Government
3. The Impact of Women as Transformative Leaders
4. Proposals for Change

You all have a copy of this analysis. The Executive Summary starting on page 3 provides you with a general overview of all the factors discussed in this report.

The Summary of Comparisons Tables in the appendixes at the back of the report list these factors by sub-region and the proposals for change to provide a guide for your separate sub-regional workshops. And the body of this report provides you with country-by-country information on these factors within the sub-regional groupings.

It is important to note that these sub-regions are not homogeneous areas. While some countries are more developed socially, economically and politically than others and there are considerable differences between sub-regions and within sub-regions, there are none the less common themes throughout.

What this analysis shows us is that we can learn from each other, we can use the initiatives taken by individual women, groups, institutions and governments as tools for change.

1. The Current Situation

Women are underrepresented in local government in the Asia and Pacific region. Statistics show the percentage of women in local government seats range from a high of 33 percent to a low of 2 percent. There are even fewer women in management positions in local government

Women in South Asia and the East Asia and Pacific sub-regions have had more electoral success overall than those in South-East Asia.

Why? In South Asia this success is directly related to a quota of seats being allocated for women, a measure that, when introduced, instantly changed the level of women's involvement. Note that even though statistics were not available in the Pakistan report, as elections for local authorities have not been held until recently, there is provision for a quota of reserved seats for women in this country.

In East Asia and the Pacific the numbers reflect the length of time women have been able to vote and stand for election; the overall level of development in most of these countries and the long campaigns for changes to increase the numbers.

It is particularly interesting to put these comparative figures on women in local government alongside those for women in central government in these countries. As you can see women clearly have had more success at gaining access to decision-making positions in local government than they have at central government level. There are more women in local governments in all countries except for Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Japan, than there are in central government positions.

Research has shown that this is mainly due to:

- Local government being easier for women to fit into their lives along with family responsibilities and employment;

- Local government being more accessible as there are more positions available and less competition for places than in central legislatures;
- Reserved seats for women on local authorities (in some countries);
- More acceptance of women in city and community government as it is seen as an extension of women's involvement in their communities.

2. Factors that affect Women's Involvement

There are three key factors affecting women's involvement in local government.

2.1. Laws, Practices and Initiatives that Ensure Participation

(a) Statutory Provisions

All of the 13 countries in this analysis have statutory provisions that guarantee women the right to participate. All have also signed the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which guarantees political and civil rights for women, although there are some reservations to these rights in some countries. For instance, Malaysia has a reservation to Article 7 (b) on the right to participate in the formulation of government policy.

(b) National Policies and Programmes

These guarantees have led to national policies and programmes being established which aim to work for change in women's lives. Some governments have established specific women's departments and plans. One example is the Philippines Plan for Gender Responsive Development 1995-2025, a government 30 year blueprint of policies, programmes, projects and strategies wherein women are both major participants and beneficiaries in national development. Since 1996 the GAD or women's budget directs all government agencies to allocate five percent of their budgets to address gender issues.

(c) Local Government Requirements

Some local governments are required to consult and to ensure participation although this is not always gender specific. In Sri Lanka local authorities are required to set up forums for dialogue between elected councillors and youth and women's groups, and there is a requirement that women and youth are included on various committees and provided with opportunities to contest elections. In New Zealand local authorities are required to publish annual plans, detailing their policies, activities, performance targets and costs and a special consultative procedure requires local authorities to call for submissions from the public.

Equal employment opportunity programmes have also been established for women employees in many local authorities throughout the Asia and Pacific region.

(d) Role of NGOs

NGOs have taken a major role in encouraging women to participate in local government. The Women's Electoral Lobby organisations in Australia and New Zealand encourage women to vote, to be active in political parties and to stand

for political office. In particular they have supported women candidates in practical ways by providing training, information and fundraising. In Japan the League of Women Voters of Japan and the Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association have taken leading roles in what has been called the “Japanese women’s silent revolution”, a movement which aims to change the belief that ‘women are not politicians’ and increase women’s representation in politics. One example of the success of this movement was seen in the 1995 local elections when 36 women candidates stood from just one of their training courses, 24 were elected. Another success story is the Aurat Foundation in Pakistan, a women’s organisation committed to the empowerment of women in governance roles. This group initiated a campaign based on public meetings, the preparation and distribution of information and intensive lobbying to increase the number of women in local government. As a result quotas for women were brought in for local government seats in two provinces and for the first time in Pakistan’s history individuals and groups were involved in the Local Government Plan 2000 which focused on devolving power and providing opportunities for the training of councillors. With elections planned for this year the Aurat Foundation and several other organisations started a new campaign, this one called the ‘Citizen’s Campaign for Women’s Representation in Local Government.’

(e) Training

Training is a crucial factor in encouraging women to participate in local government and in ensuring this participation is effective. Training is provided throughout the whole region by NGOs, governments, political parties and training institutes. Some examples include the Vietnam Women’s Union and the National Committee for the Advancement of Women who work with local government to organise training for women candidates on political, economic and cultural information, gender awareness and leadership skills. As well, they run campaigns to support women candidates and to encourage people to vote for them. In India, NGOs have provided training and support for women and work on consciousness-raising with the aim being to change women’s perceptions about the need to be involved and to transform politics.

Local governments have also set up orientation and training programmes for women on municipal legislation, budgeting and taxation, service delivery systems, poverty alleviation schemes, community and environmental management, shelter committees, communication skills and women and development.

(f) Regional and International Conferences

Regional and international conferences provide support, training and momentum for initiatives which increase the numbers of women. For instance, after participating in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women two women in Japan set up a Back-up School to Send Women to Assemblies. The electoral success of those who completed their first course resulted in 20 more prototypes being set up throughout Japan and a great number of course participants became local councillors / assembly members at the 1999 Unified

Local Election. Another network of women who had attended a regional Asia and Pacific Women in Politics forum in Manila in 1998 started a 'Campaign for Increasing Women in Politics' which focused on those prefectures and local councils where there was no women representative.

(g) Initiatives by Women in Local Government

Women within local government have also initiated programmes to encourage women to participate and have established their own associations for support and training. The Australian Local Government Women's Association is one example in which branches have initiated mentoring programmes for women, targeted councils where women were either not represented or under represented, conducted pre election seminars in both urban and rural areas and worked with NGOs to develop initiatives to support women candidates. The China Association of Mayors has a Branch of Women Mayors who meet for support and training in aspects of their job.

(h) Data Collection

The collection of data on women's participation in local government adds to the visibility of women. Election statistics are published in New Zealand after every local government election and these include comprehensive and comparative data on women. In India all levels of government collect gender-disaggregated data for use in policy and programme formulation and quantitative and qualitative data on the number of women and men employed and elected in the various levels of government. In countries where statistics do not exist, as has been the case in Pakistan, information is more difficult to access and use for debate and policy development.

2.2 Barriers to participation

(a) Fundamental Inequality

The reality of women's lives is that while they have constitutional rights, they are not seen as equal, their roles are closely tied to their reproductive and household activities, and politics and community affairs are seen as unsuitable for them. In many countries in the Asia and Pacific region women are constrained by obstacles such as culture and tradition (the view that men are superior to women), religion, political turmoil, violence, money, workloads and lack of opportunities. Demographic statistics, particularly in the South Asia sub-region, show low literacy rates, poor health rates and poverty, all of which point to a lack of basic rights to such things as education, health care, safety and employment opportunities. For instance, in Pakistan only 19 percent of women in rural areas and 52 percent of women in urban areas are literate and the infant mortality rate for girls between the age of 1 and 4 years is 66 percent higher than for boys. And Nepal is one of the few countries in the world where life expectancy is lower for women than for men, the average lifespan of a women being only 53 years. This is due, in part, to the poor health of women in this country as almost 80 percent are anaemic and infant and maternal mortality rates are high.

(b) Political and Economic Instability

Political and economic instability all affect the development of a political culture with democratic norms, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and directly and indirectly affect the status and rights of women at every level of society and negatively impact on opportunities to participate in decision-making. Socio-cultural norms and religious interpretations are frequently used for challenging and reinterpreting women's rights and creating insecurity for women. And although women have equal political rights to participate as voters and representatives, in reality they can be actively discouraged to do so. Highly patriarchal societies enforce rules, responsibilities and behaviour for women, enforcing these norms in ways that affect their self-confidence, limit their access to information and skills and reinforce their lower status. One example of this is in Pakistan where women are prevented from exercising their vote by their families and by local and spiritual leaders and agreements are made between candidates and political parties to restrain women from casting their votes.

(c) Discrimination

Women also face discrimination when standing for office and when elected or appointed to local government positions. Attitudes that put politics and decision-making into the male preserve see women as incapable of management and governance roles. And governance practices in which important decisions are made during drinking sessions, exclude women from participating. Survey results show that conservative attitudes, particularly towards women at senior management level, have meant that women did not fit the image on the 'man in charge' concept. This prevailing attitude to women contributes to the lack of confidence that many voters have in women. In Japan some women reported facing gender-related discrimination from their opponents when standing for election, including mass dissemination of handbills that contained slanderous information on the women candidates. In Australia the harassment and intimidation of one woman chief executive resulted in a public enquiry and subsequent dismissal of the council. The enquiry found that "a lot of the hostility to, and prejudice against her [had], as one of its principal causes or roots, the fact that she is not only a women, but a forceful and successful one at that."

(d) The male environment within political institutions

The male environment within political institutions can deter women. The fact that there are few women on decision-making bodies means that these women have to work within styles and modes that are acceptable to men. As a result women find they cannot be open about women's issues and social justice. Some also find they are judged harshly by society and by their colleagues. For example, if they handle matters as men do they are said to be arrogant and seeking the limelight. One example of this in the China report described how traditional beliefs about superiority of men can have a negative impact on how women are seen as decision-makers. In the indirect elections for village committees the women are criticised and rejected despite the fact that they have often outperformed men. And some of the women surveyed in the Philippines report pointed out that a barrier to women entering local government

was the attitude that politics and decision-making are part of the male world: women being seen as physically and intellectually incapable of managing towns.

(e) Costs – ‘even the smallest of elections costs money’

The cost of standing for election and the remuneration paid for the job both affect women’s ability to be involved. Campaign expenses are prohibitive for women, particularly while they continue to earn less than men in the labour market. Once elected the rate of remuneration can be insufficient for what is, in some countries, almost a full time job. Women’s role within the family means that they juggle family responsibilities with their public roles and in some cases employment. The lack of childcare support can also be a barrier as the timing of local authority meetings do not always fit into the daily workloads in women’s lives.

2.3 Impact of the Political System on Participation

(a) The Local Government System

Women’s involvement in local government can depend on the level of democracy practised. Women can be disadvantaged by a system of local government which is strictly controlled by central government, is totally reliant on central funding to provide local administration, has little accountability to the community within which it operates and to which members are appointed. In Malaysia where elections have been suspended since 1960, all councillors are political appointees and those considered for appointment have had to have worked long and hard at both grassroots and senior levels for the party. As a consequence, women form less than 10 percent of nominated members and there are few women in management positions. Women are more likely to participate in a devolved system of local government that, while working within central or state government statute, has more autonomy, greater financial freedom (local rates revenue providing funding), holds regular elections and is more responsive to local communities and open to influence. An example of this elected /appointed difference is in Vietnam where nearly 26% of locally elected people’s council seats are filled by women whereas appointments to people’s committees have only resulted in about 6% of these seats going to women.

(b) Electoral System

The electoral system used for electing representatives has had a significant impact on women’s access to political office. Proportional representation party list systems of election can result in more women being elected. A guarantee in the Philippines constitution that one half of all seats allocated to party list representatives would go to specific groups including women resulted in the election of a women’s party with a commitment to advancing women’s rights. The recent introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional system in New Zealand’s Parliament resulted in a jump of almost 10 percent more women in just one election.

(c) Wards versus At-Large Systems of Elections

There is also some evidence that local elections that are based on ward representation improve women's chances of being elected as women candidates are more likely to be known to voters in their local communities than in an at-large election across the city. Wards can also enable more women to stand for election as campaigning costs are not as high as in a city wide election. In Sri Lanka, it is interesting to note that while quotas for women have so far been rejected, wards have been recommended instead – to help more women get elected.

(d) A Quota of Reserved Seats for Women

The introduction of quotas systems for women in local government in many countries in the South Asia region has resulted in significant increases in the number of women elected. For women in Bangladesh, reserved seats for women commissioners and quotas for women in the civil service has meant the difference between almost no women in these positions and the recognition that women have the right to be there. In Nepal where socio-economic and cultural discrimination is strong, quotas were introduced as an acknowledgement that women have political rights and reserved seats ensured their participation.

However, while reserved seats for women clearly increase the number of women being elected and employed in local government, they are not favoured by those who prefer to contest seats via the traditional 'merit based' system. But for women in India, traditional systems contained significant barriers to electoral success. Their demand for quotas was not based on the concept of privilege for women; it was seen as a vital measure that ensured they became part of the mainstream of politics and development. For these women, constitutional guarantees of rights for women had neither resulted in women gaining access to decision-making positions as of right nor led to women's issues being part of the political agenda. What they needed was a fundamental shift in numbers rather than a case of getting a few more women into politics.

In Japan numerical and time bound targets have been preferred as a way of encouraging political parties to recruit women candidates. While these targets have not been enforced they have been voluntarily implemented and have led to some of the political parties recruiting women candidates and one political party setting up a special fund for women candidates.

(e) Access to and Effectiveness of Reserved Seats

Even with quotas there are still barriers to women accessing reserved seats and effectively participating in local government once there. While there are reserved seats for women in local councils in Pakistan, elections are only held infrequently and these reserved seats are decided through indirect election. As a result indirectly elected women in reserved seats have had little autonomy as they have been expected to support the politics of the group that have elected them. As well, when compared with directly elected positions, reserved seats can be seen as having an inferior status and a lack of constituency and the ability to be part of decision-making can still be blocked from within the system.

For instance, in Bangladesh the responsibilities of women ward commissioners are not gazetted and the resulting confusion over their roles has undermined the status of these elected women. As a result they find themselves in a position where they are not equal to the elected men, they don't have the same access to funding and they cannot take development initiatives without the permission of male commissioners.

Effective participation can also be hampered by a lack of understanding of urban development issues, local government laws, administration and service delivery. Considerable support and training is needed to assist women to learn the way in which the political environment works and support is also needed to help them fulfil both their public and private roles.

(f) Kinship Ties

Kinship ties have enabled many women to access political positions. While such connections mean that women grow up learning political skills and a political consciousness, their election or appointment into political environments that remain inherently conservative and male can mean that they have little impact or ability to change policies, particularly for women. For women without family connections, barriers to participation remain.

(g) Political party Support for Women

Political parties have historically acted as gatekeepers to women's participation in politics, as few electoral opportunities and a desire to field a winning candidate have resulted in many political parties shying away from fielding more than a token number of women candidates, believing instead that voters prefer male politicians. Some women's branches within parties have developed to support and train women for political positions. Others have not been so forthcoming.

(h) The Adversarial Nature of Politics

Many women are just not prepared to be involved in political environments which support an aggressive culture, combative debate and personality conflicts. Nor are they prepared to have to deal with male colleagues who have difficulty coping with women and so belittle and personally attack them. The increasing corruption in politics has been another disincentive as growing disillusionment over the inability of political parties to deliver; and a lack of faith in the electoral process itself has resulted, in some cases, in a general downward trend in overall voter turnout.

3. The Impact of Women as Transformative Leadership

So why have women in local government and why do we want more? Why this focus on looking at what helps and hinders women's participation? One of the reasons is a growing recognition that women make a difference – they have an impact on political institutions and agendas. And the different approaches that women take to governance have been defined as a version of transformative leadership.

Taking a lead from the Centre for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics transformative leadership is broadly defined here as being based on a new political paradigm: a politics that is both transformed and transformational. Within this framework politics are transformed to ensure that power is used to create change and develop people and communities; it is non-hierarchical and participatory; and it gives priority to disadvantaged sectors. Politics are seen as transformational when they work for economic, social and political equality for women within a humane and sustainable society.

Some believe that:

“it is in the contradictory experience of progress and oppression that the transformative power of women’s political work is located”

(Cohen, Jones and Tronto, *Women Transforming Politics. An Alternative Reader*, 1997. p.3)

As part of the research undertaken for the 13 country reports on which this analysis is based, questionnaires were distributed to women in each country in order to find out the impact these women have on local government and the impact that more women are likely to have. It is clear that these women do believe that they have an impact on local government and that they practise transformative leadership. The evidence they present is of different agendas and styles from men and they show that their presence has an impact on local government and on women in general. The nature of their leadership is defined by the issues they promote, their style of leadership and their impact on equality.

However it also has to be said that while the basic right to participate is continually undermined by political systems and through barriers imposed by tradition and culture, some women are still dealing with the first hurdle of just getting into local government. This can mean that they often have to start with a more conservative approach and work within party lines than initially promoting different agendas. The exciting thing is that even in these repressive systems we see women making a difference even if only in small ways.

(a) *The Issues they Promote*

So if we move on to the issues they promote, these women say:

- They have a greater sense of social issues and the well being and welfare of their communities. Their priorities are more likely to centre on housing, safety, clean water, sanitation, education, the social implications of policies, health services, childcare, poverty alleviation and community development.
- They have a commitment to improving the environment within their communities. In planning city development, local government women take into account the physical considerations, the quality of life, harmony in art and culture and environmental development.
- They have different priorities and are prepared to spend time on issues that some men find trivial such as family issues, dowry problems and violence against women and children.

- They focus on change, preferring a more democratic and transparent approach to governance in an effort to move away from the adversarial and, in some cases, corrupt image of politics.

(b) Their style of Leadership

They say their leadership is:

- More inclusive, collaborative and consultative
- More tolerant of different points of view
- More people orientated
- Encourages participation
- Places a higher emphasis on the importance of good communication with their communities
- Uses more democratic and facilitative forms of decision-making
- Based on leadership by example, focusing on the issues rather than personalities
- More assertive, innovative and conscientious.

(c) Their Impact on Equality

The women say:

- They encourage more women to be politically aware and to participate
- They promote gender equity policies
- They provide role models for other women and promote women to decision-making positions
- They improve the status of women by promoting policies, projects and funding for development that increase understanding of conditions for women and children
- They are changing the environment of local government, making it more people friendly, consultative and more transparent.
- They are changing the focus of policies and services within local government to take account of the real needs of the community.
- They are accelerating change.

And they have their feet on the ground as seen in the following statement by one woman mayor who said that she had “done no more than demonstrate that a woman of ordinary average intelligence, education and talent can succeed if given a chance to show what she can do.’

4. Proposals for Change

The priority is to increase significantly the number of women in local government.

It is clear that a comprehensive country-level strategy that takes into account the specific issues related to the status of women in society, structures of government and the culture of governance, needs to be discussed and adopted in order to increase the representation and participation of women in local government.

Strategies are identified in this report which address the issues and constraints that have come through from the country reports. To overcome the barriers that remain there are several broad areas that need to be addressed. These are the systems within which local government operates, the attitudes towards women in local government and strategies that need to be developed to enable a greater number of women to move into local government as elected representatives and as senior managers. Specific recommendations on training are also identified, as this is an area that has received a lot of attention in the country reports.

The report suggests four key strategies that are common to the whole Asia-pacific region and some that are relevant to particular sub-regions. A list of the sub-regional proposals is listed in Appendix B.

Common proposals for change include:

(a) *Changes to the systems within which local government operates*

- A quota of reserved seats for women to be implemented, particularly where few women have been elected. These reserved seats to be permanent, filled through direct and open elections and to have the same status as general seats
- Proportional representation systems of voting be implemented
- The number of elected positions at community level be maintained
- Wards systems for electing representatives be retained
- EEO programmes to ensure more women are employed in local government and to enable more women to move into senior management positions
- Elected representatives to be paid at a level that will enable more women to participate
- Local government implement the policies outlined in Agenda 21 on good governance
- Consultation processes be established to ensure women participate
- Funding allocated for gender and development that emphasises capacity building, networking and advocacy
- Women's standing committees be established
- Recruitment by political parties of women candidates

(b) *Ways of changing attitudes towards women in local government*

- The culture of local government needs to change to ensure that women are treated fairly and equally and to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable
- Gender awareness programmes for men and women need to be developed
- Local government needs to be more women friendly. Consensus style politics and meetings at times that fit into the other responsibilities that women have, will enhance the political environment

- Opportunities need to be made available for women as soon as they are elected to learn about local government and their governance role and to provide them with support.

(c) *Strategies to increase the number of women*

- Strategies need to be adopted to change policies and structures that perpetuate women's subordinate status
- Policies on economic and social empowerment are needed to enable women to participate on an equal footing with men
- Local government needs to work closely with NGOs, civil societies and women's groups to develop communities and services that take account of the needs of women
- Women in local government need financial support, childcare, support systems (particularly support from other women) and training opportunities.
- Women's associations to be established for women councillors and managers in local government to provide a voice for women's views and a base for networking
- Women in local government need to encourage more women to participate
- Funds to be established to assist women to run for election
- Gender-disaggregated statistics need to be collected to increase the visibility of women.

(d) *Training*

- Training programmes to be established by NGOs, political parties, educational and political institutions to help women in local government develop skills and self confidence and to enable them to learn the functions and processes within this tier of government
- Training to be provided for women candidates on the political system, local government functions and processes
- Workshops be provided on gender awareness and development for both women and men in order to educate people on women's rights and the importance of women's equality
- Girls and young women's education should include training on self-reliance, self-confidence and their potential for decision-making positions.

Regional Support

A regional structure needs to be considered as a pivotal part of changes put in place to ensure the numbers of women in local government increase, training and support networks are established and to assist with ensuring that the political environment become more women friendly and political agendas include women and development issues.

While there are already regional networks and plans in the Asia-Pacific area that focus on women's empowerment, none of these focus primarily on women in local government.

Regional action should focus on:

- Establishing regional targets for increasing the number of women in local government within timeframes and monitoring progress achieved;
- Promoting exchange of experience, information and comparative research through the networks of women in local government, governmental and non-governmental organisations, political parties and research and training institutes.
- Promoting regional, sub-regional and country-based training programmes on gender mainstreaming, training of women already in local government as well as training women aspiring for positions in local government through organising regional and sub-regional conferences and workshops for women in local government to share strategies, network, provide training and support.
- Catalysing resource mobilisation at the country level to support training and campaigns of women candidates in local governments.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of the 13 country reports on the State of Women in Local Government and the Asia-Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councillors by ESCAP are first steps in a long journey to achieve the goal of gender balance in local government. The momentum created by these activities must be built upon if the goal of gender balance in local government is to be achieved.