



EMERGING ISSUES IN ASIA

panel ii:

# Strengthening Democracy Through Women's Political Participation



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On April 14, 1999, amidst the lingering Asian economic crisis, political uncertainty in numerous Asian nations, and ever-changing security challenges for the United States in the Asia Pacific region, The Asia Foundation held its Emerging Issues in Asia seminar. The seminar allowed participants to look at four vital issues in an in depth manner and develop a clearer sense of how those issues might play out in the wake of the economic crisis and the political turmoil of the past two years.

Asia's dynamic environment made the spring of 1999 an appropriate time to address both elements of progress and remaining obstacles, within areas ranging from human rights and legal reform to security issues. The seminar's four panels featured Asia Foundation resident representatives in the region, and were moderated by senior experts on Asian policy. The panels focused on effective strategies for human rights and legal reform, the participation of women in politics and other sectors of society, governance reform in the aftermath of the economic crisis, and the current security challenges in Northeast Asia.

It is hoped that the insights drawn from the seminar help to foster further thinking about the most effective approaches to democratic development, economic progress, and stable international relations in the Asia Pacific. Asia's prospects in the coming century will be determined to a large extent by the ability of both Asian leaders and the international community to understand that the increasingly complex set of challenges in Asia can only be met by new and comprehensive approaches to policymaking.

The Asia Foundation is a private nongovernmental organization that funds and operates projects in Asia. The Foundation's programs help develop and strengthen the leadership, institutions, and policies needed for effective governance and legal systems, open market economies, an engaged and responsible nongovernmental sector, increased women's participation, and peace and stability in the region.

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# Opening Remarks

by THERESA LOAR

Women's political participation is a key component of democracy. Here in the U.S., we are fortunate at this moment in time to have the extraordinary leadership team of our First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright committed to this issue. Individually and as partners, they have taken an active role in carrying this message around the globe.

The issue of women's political participation is on the front page of newspapers in established democracies worldwide and also in those countries that are moving toward democracy. There was a time when most of the faces of women in newspapers were the faces of victims. Sadly, with the tragedy unfolding in Kosovo, we continue to see many faces of women and children suffer most of all.

But we are also seeing women who are emerging as builders of democracy. Women who are registering to vote and who are making their vote count. Women who are coming to the forefront in countries that do not have a democratic tradition but are working in that direction. Conditions for promoting democracy may not be all that comfortable, but women's groups are finding that they can become a force for democratic change. Many times, because they are women's groups, they can begin by operating under the radar so to speak, without drawing much attention from hostile authorities. After a while, their numbers grow and their influence is clearly seen and heard.

It will be especially interesting to hear from these three representatives of The Asia Foundation about how women's political participation is occurring in their respective posts, in Nepal, Mongolia, and Sri Lanka.

A brief note first about the Vital Voices: Women in Democracy Initiative, which is part of Madeleine Albright's foreign policy and enjoys the strong support and leadership of First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. This is a project that was kicked off in July 1997 when our then American Ambassador to Austria Swanee Hunt brought together 400 women leaders from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to share their ideas and best practices on how to develop democracy and strengthen women's role in economic progress in their respective countries.

There has been a great response to this private/public partnership worldwide at similar coverings in Northern Ireland and throughout Latin America. New linkages are being formed and a global network is being established. There is a similarity between the goals of Vital Voices and those of the Global Women in Politics program sponsored by The Asia Foundation. I would like to thank Carol Yost, who has been a terrific partner for us at the State Department and who is playing such a valuable role in bringing The Asia Foundation's commitment of women's political participation right into the mainstream. 🌍

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# Nepal

by JULIO A. ANDREWS

Nepal has a certain mystique that can overshadow the very real challenges facing the people and particularly the women who live there. A few pieces of statistical information can help put this Himalayan country, positioned between India and China, into perspective.

## A Real Perspective

Nepal has 22.5 million people. Of that number, 86 percent are Hindus. Although the Hindu caste system was abolished in 1993, the social caste system prevails, meaning 20 percent of Nepal's population are considered untouchables. The country has more than 100 ethnic groups, and the people speak at least 50 ethnic languages.

The per capita annual income is \$225. Nearly 50 percent of the people in Nepal live below the poverty line. Still, the population growth rate is 2.5 percent. That means that the population has the capacity to double in 24 years even though the country has the highest infant mortality rate in South Asia.

Nepal's annual budget is a mere \$1 billion, half of which comes from external donors. Its external debt exceeds \$2.5 billion. While political instability has stymied economic progress, gross domestic product (GDP) grew by only 1 percent, the lowest in a decade, in 1997 and 1998. In the last five years, Nepal's rupee has been devalued by 30 percent — and by 7 percent in the last year alone. There are indeed a lot of problems in Nepal.

The country was ruled by the Ranas until 1951, when they were overthrown by King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram. Seven

years later, in 1958, King Mahendra appointed a committee to draft the country's first democratic constitution, which then was approved the following year. The first parliamentary elections also occurred in 1959. Then in 1961, King Mahendra proclaimed a state of emergency, the parliament was dissolved, and the national *panchayat*, or royalist system, was founded. Political parties were banned and a number of constitutional amendments were promulgated to strengthen the king's rule.

In 1979, a popular student movement, joined by the country's political parties, challenged the king's rule. In 1990, a mass movement succeeded in restoring democracy. The king accepted a constitutional monarchy and called an election for establishing a multiparty democracy, which has existed since 1991. Since then, the government has changed seven times, including five times in the last three years. The government of Nepal has lasted for as few as six months and at most, 41 months. The sitting prime minister is Nepal's seventh.

## Major Political Parties

There are four major political parties, two of which are Communist-affiliated. The Maoist movement, considered a serious problem, threatens to thwart national elections, slated for May 3 and May 17, 1999. Already, over 800 people have been killed, and a number of these, who were running for office have withdrawn their candidacy. In fact, many have questioned whether the Maoist threat would stand in the way of the elections actually moving forward.

The concept of representative government still has a long way to go in Nepal. In terms of leadership, institutional process and capacity, internal debate and decisionmaking processes, political parties still are in their infancy. None function in an open and democratic manner. Conflicts originating within the parties have led to formal splits in the Nepali Democratic Party and the United Marxist Leninist Party and to extreme differences within the Nepali Congress Party. As a result, public leaders focus on narrow self-interest and not the interests of the public, triggering collusion between themselves and the business sector.

In full view, politicians can be seen fighting greedily for control of ministries where the opportunities for financial gain and other benefits are ample. Ministers publicly admit to taking bribes and encouraging illegal transactions to accommodate resources and funding for their parties and for themselves. People-based economic programs touted by one party can be opposed by another with the intention of diluting or undermining an incumbent's power.

One consequence over the last eight years has been the rapid erosion of the public's respect and trust in their political leadership. Leaders are perceived as detached from the people they represent and not as true representatives who work on behalf of the public's interest.

### Women's Political Participation

Where does women's political participation fit into this challenging situation? In 1990, when Nepal restored parliamentary democracy, a constitutional mandate was passed to ensure the participation of women in national

elections. As a result, 5 percent of all candidates who seek seats in the House of Representatives are reserved for women.

Then, prior to local elections in 1977, the government passed an act that requires 20 percent of the elected seats in the Village Development Committees, or VDCs, be set aside for women, with at least one woman elected to each of the nine wards that comprise a VDC. Partly as a result of this ruling, 35,000 women have won seats at the ward level. A

number of women also have been assigned seats in an effort to further their political participation.

Still, a number of factors inhibit women's ability to get involved in politics, including the fact that many simply do not have a basic education. The truth is, most elected women in Nepal are illiterate. Nor do they have support from their families and the male members of the VDC.

Too often, they cannot afford to leave their livelihoods to spend time in politics. And they are victims of socio-cultural values that condition men to look down on women.

What part is The Asia Foundation playing to address women's political participation in Nepal or in the women's agenda? In its 1996 budget, the Foundation made specific reference to working with women and disadvantaged groups for the first time. This prompted a critical and indepth review by the staff of those programs funded by The Asia Foundation since its opening of offices in Nepal in 1990. At the time, the overall program focused on strengthening key democratic institutions, namely, the parliament, the judiciary, the media, and the then nascent NGO (nongovernmental organization) movement. (Today, Nepal has some 25,000 NGOs.) Women and disadvantaged

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groups were being targeted as part of the Foundation's civil society programs.

### Asia Foundation Programs

With its 1997 program budget, the Foundation moved decisively toward a focus on women's political participation, specifically designating women's empowerment as one of four programming areas. It subsequently created a single program area, referred to as the empowerment of women. Today, the Foundation's Nepal program supports women's political participation on a number of fronts. In the area of law and governance, the Foundation supports a range of legal literacy programs.

For example, a legal literacy and advocacy program for 90,000 rural women was completed last year and we now are launching a second phase, designed to reach 130,000 rural women in 21 districts across Nepal. We support a women's pilot community mediation program, the drafting of a women's property rights bill, a national advocacy program for passage of the bill, paralegal training for women, and a study program to help women law graduates pass the bar exam. A recent research report, focused on gender and the judiciary, shows serious and widespread gender-based bias against women on the judiciary's part — which is 98.8 percent male. Meanwhile, the Center for Legal Research and Resources also is conducting a study on the impact of corruption on Nepalese women.

In the area of the media, the Foundation has supported the formation of Nepal's first Women's Journalist Association, journalism training for women reporters, and training programs on reporting of women's issues. In the area of education and economic participation, the Foundation supports a five-year female education scholarship program that is designed to keep 5,000 girls in school in just one of Nepal's districts. This program also paved the way for

additional programs, one, an advocacy program for 90,000 rural women and the other, a women's economic and legal rights program for 2,000 high school leaders. These programs have led, in turn, to the formation of 2,000 women's advocacy groups.

In the area of women's reproductive rights and maternal health, the Foundation is reaching 1.2 million rural women and their husbands through its family planning and reproduction health program. In the area of representative government, the Foundation supported Nepal's first study of barriers to women's political participation, a pro-women candidates program during the last local elections, and a leadership training program for newly elected women leaders. Of the 1,700 women who participated in the pro-women candidates program, 1,021 ran for office — and 430 won. Later on, we trained 550 women in leadership and political representation skills, many of who went on to win elections.

As for basic security concerns, the Foundation supports the first comprehensive research project on violence against women and girls in Nepal, along with a number of programs that address the cross-border trafficking of girls. We also have been part of a regional conference on HIV/AIDS, a trafficking survey of organizations that are focused on border dialogues with India, and educational programs based in two districts for girls who are at risk. Finally, the Foundation established a women's research center which distributes material on women's issues.

In summary, the Foundation's Women's Political Participation program is increasing women's awareness and advocacy skills. It helps women turn their personal concerns into public issues. It is helping women put their issues on the public agenda, influence policy, allowing them to create their own public agenda, and facilitating their participation in the political process. 🌱

# Mongolia

by KATHERINE S. HUNTER

Ten years ago this November (1999), the democracy movement in Mongolia initiated a dual economic and political transition after more than 70 years under a socialist political system and centrally planned economy. By 1992, Mongolia had promulgated a new constitution, which guaranteed equal rights for men and women. That year also marked the emergence of citizen-initiated NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), co-existing with the “mass” organizations that were beginning to reformulate themselves in the new political environment. The NGOs’ initial focus was on provision of the social protection and social security that were no longer provided by the state.

## Women’s Organizations

A number of women’s organizations were among these NGOs, some of which had evolved from their strong affiliation with political parties. This meant that these new independent and nonpartisan women’s organizations were comprised of politically conscious and active women. Today, there are 1,100 NGOs registered with the Ministry of Justice, and more than 30 are women’s organizations. Their focus ranges from the delivery of services to public affairs, with several of the more prominent women’s organizations concerned with public affairs, for example, the Liberal Women’s Brain Pool, the Women for Social Progress, and the Women’s Federation.

There are some striking differences in women’s participation in the political process. On the positive side, women vote in fairly equal numbers with men. In formal politics,

women have a more limited role, with only eight of 76 seats in the current Parliament. At the same time, this number represents an increase from just three members in the previous Parliament. Just as important is the fact that these eight women were elected rather than appointed under the quota system that existed in the pre-1990 period. The new government of Prime Minister Janlaviin Narantsatsralt has two very high-level women appointees, the Minister of External Relations and a senior economic advisor in the Office of the Prime Minister. At the local level, there are a very limited number of women in either appointed or elected positions. In view of the overall situation, women’s NGOs are targeting the Year 2000 parliamentary and local elections to increase women’s representation.

In contrast, women participate actively in civic life at both the local and national levels. They do this primarily through NGOs, many of which focus on issues of importance to women. These are issues that are frequently neglected during a transition period or are a reflection of emerging concerns in the new political and economic environment. Women’s NGOs also focus on broader issues related to governance, accountability, and openness.

In their role as activist citizens, women are defining the norms for citizen participation and civil society in Mongolia’s young democracy. Obviously, this is very important for the country’s development. And although men are involved in NGOs, too, it is fair to say that the women’s NGOs are the leaders when it comes to engaging in the broader public interest.

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The Asia Foundation, which began its program in Mongolia in 1990, has worked with women's NGOs interested in public affairs since their inception in 1992. The Foundation sees this work as part of a broader strategy to support Mongolia's political and economic reform process. In our view, a vigorous democracy means there must be a legitimate role for citizens, in elections, and more broadly, in civic life.

Work in this area is particularly important in view of the country's political history. Under the old socialist system, all citizens' initiatives were discouraged and the government was neither open nor accountable. Today, women's NGOs are taking important steps to change this. Their influence can be divided into two different phases, starting in 1992 with the emergence of citizen-initiated NGOs and continuing through to today.

The first phase is roughly 1992 to 1995, during which women's NGOs concentrated on information transmission. This occurred in an environment characterized as enthusiastic and proud in the new constitution. There was also greater appreciation for the serious lack of knowledge about the new political system. NGOs paid considerable attention to creating awareness in areas of legal literacy, women's political and civic participation, and voter education.

The second phase began in 1996. It was then that a new consciousness started taking hold among women, stimulated by their participation in and the influence of the Women's Conference in Beijing. The Women's Conference exposed Mongolians to many new ideas and linked women to their colleagues around the globe. Since then, the demand for information has not diminished, particularly in isolated rural areas.

#### New Initiatives for Citizen Participation

At the same time, there is more attention to the broader processes of citizen participation, for example, using a num-

ber of new approaches to influence decisionmaking and to promote positive change outside of the election process. These new initiatives fall into two broad categories. The first is the expansion of advocacy efforts, growing from influencing decisions on certain issues to include monitoring or watchdog activities. The second is an expanded role in the legislative drafting process.

Women's NGOs have undertaken several important initiatives in these two areas. They have now been engaged in advocacy for a number of years. Notable and successful examples include women's NGOs joining efforts to increase the number of women in the 1996 parliamentary elections and the collective request of 23 organizations at the first women's NGO conference for the government to form a national women's council.

By late 1997, the women's NGOs had expanded their focus to include a watchdog role to promote government accountability. At that time, a seven-member coalition of women's organizations—which is now 13—formed to monitor government implementation of the United Nations Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or CEDAW. Mongolia signed the convention in 1981.

Citizen monitoring of government performance was new to Mongolia, and the women's organizations who comprise the National CEDAW Watch Network had to learn new analytic skills in order to determine whether laws and regulations were in place; whether enforcement was weak; and whether there were other barriers to implementation. Realizing the immensity of the task, the group narrowed its focus to women's economic status and employment issues. Today, the monitoring extends to the countryside. As a result of five regional workshops slated to take place later this year, each of Mongolia's 21 provinces will have trained women who know about CEDAW and are able to monitor government performance at the local level.

The second example illustrates the expanded role of women's NGOs in the area of legislative drafting, which helps to insure more effective representation of women's interests in Mongolia's evolving legal framework. Women have experience in commenting on existing laws, for instance, the revised labor law. In their expanded role, they are extending the precedent for citizen and NGO participation in the legislative process, first seen when NGOs played an active role in drafting of Mongolia's NGO law (adopted in 1997).

#### Two Important Initiatives

There have been two important initiatives by the women's NGOs in the legislative process. The first is the Women for Social Progress' work with the parliament secretariat on a new election management law. This effort represents the first ever-formal government-NGO task force and is a tribute to the growing legitimacy of NGOs in Mongolia. It is also significant because work on the election management law represents an effort that transcends strict gender interests.

The second initiative is the work of the Women Lawyers' Association and the Center Against Violence in drafting Mongolia's first-ever domestic violence law. The proposed legislation responds to an increasing number of incidents of domestic violence during this period of transition. It also

reflects the shift of domestic violence from the private into the public domain. Meanwhile, the drafting process is drawing in children's rights groups as well as the police. This inclusive process makes the drafting more challenging, but is also important in terms of creating constituencies that can help mobilize support for the legislation's adoption.

Mongolia's women's NGOs are engaged in an increasingly diverse set of areas. The women who are active in public affairs have a very sophisticated view of their involvement in the political process. They see women's political and civic participation not as an end in and of itself, but as a critical way to influence their country's laws and regulations. They are also expressing their views on issues of importance to them and their families.

Meanwhile, women's NGOs are also setting new benchmarks for how NGOs

operate in Mongolia's civic life. The Asia Foundation considers a vibrant civil society to be a key component of a democracy and in this regard, women's NGOs play the lead role in Mongolia. The women's NGOs do face operational and programmatic challenges, but their progress to date indicates that the women's NGO movement definitely will continue to play a key role in advancing Mongolia's democratic development. 🌱

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# Sri Lanka

by MARK READE MCKENNA

The political context in Sri Lanka is quite different from that in both Mongolia and Nepal. In Sri Lanka, democratic institutions and processes have been in place for a number of years, and women have had the right to vote since 1931. Women's suffrage was put into effect two years after it passed in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the ability to vote has not resulted in a great deal of participation on the part of women, at least not in formal institutions.

## Women's Participation

There currently are 12 women who are members of Parliament, 90 percent of whom are in place by virtue of a kinship tie to a father, brother, or husband who more times than not in the Sri Lankan context, was assassinated. This brief outline suggests some of the barriers facing women, starting with the limitation in any society where resources and status are lacking.

Participation requires the means to do so since the nature of politics in a democratic process is a competitive process. To the extent that women in Sri Lanka have a lower status and/or less means than in either Nepal or Mongolia, they are going to face limitations. But what are the problems that are specific to Sri Lanka?

One of the most critical barriers for Sri Lankan women is the fear of violence that has become associated with the political process. Another problem that is directly related to roles and a division of labor based on gender, is the shortage of time women face when they shoulder responsibility for

maintaining a household and generating income.

Another, as mentioned earlier, is a shortage of resources. In Sri Lanka, women typically do not have access to property or to other income resources. They often lack mobility, and there is frequently a problem with social acceptance. It is a bit ironic that men say politics is inappropriate for women because it is often violent, thus providing justification for excluding women.

Why are politics so violent in Sri Lanka? Clearly, it has to do with the civil conflict that has raged in Sri Lanka for the last 20 years. But it has more to do with the very nature of Sri Lanka's political culture. This is a political culture that focuses on the quest for power with very little concern paid to civil service, civic responsibility, serving constituents, or to public service as a part of the process. Politics comes down to who is going to control public resources, and who is going to benefit from the privileged access to public resources. If you consider all is fair in love and war, then Sri Lankan politics falls into that category.

## The Benefits

What benefits can accrue when women participate in politics? A central reason for arguing on behalf of women's political participation, both informally and formally, is to break this vicious cycle—the nature of the political culture in Sri Lanka in effect excludes women, and their exclusion strengthens the existing culture, with all its faults. Only when there are sufficient avenues for women's political participation can we begin to break this circle. This is a

long-term process and requires much more than focusing on elections and creating awareness.

Women also bring a different set of concerns to the political process by virtue of their roles and status in society. One of the very interesting findings in a recent poll on attitudes toward peace, conducted by the National Peace Council in Sri Lanka, shows that 74 percent of the women surveyed identified the cost of the conflict as having a significant impact on their lives. That contrasted with only 51 percent of the men who identified the conflict's economic, social, and political consequences in their lives.

It is important to recognize that simply getting into the political process is not enough. Women have multiple identities, which means issues of class and ethnic background can persist and influence outcomes even in women's groups. It is noteworthy that women's groups were very important in the run up to the 1994-1995 elections in Sri Lanka when the focus was on peace and conflict. A women's NGO forum and a group called Women In Black attempted to mobilize a mass movement in favor of the peace process. The effort fell apart when the peace process faltered, breaking along similar class and ethnic lines to the faltering peace process in 1995. Women were unable to maintain their solidarity in the face of pressures from other parts of their respective identities.

After being in Sri Lanka a year, it is my observation that women are just beginning again after three years to try to come together. They are starting to acknowledge a need for

solidarity and solidarity groups. At the same time, women from other areas, for example from outside Colombo, are starting to mobilize more. An interesting development is the emergence of solidarity among the wives and family members of soldiers, including those who are missing in action, and others who are pushing the government and the LTTE (the Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a secessionist Tamil group), to account for missing relatives. In fact, they have become a very vocal group calling for a different approach to settling the conflict.

#### The Agromart Foundation

The Agromart Foundation, now 10 years old, is one of the organizations The Asia Foundation works with in Sri Lanka. It belongs in the context of women's participation issues, having passed through an interesting transition to represent this new awareness among women's groups. Ten years ago, Agromart began trying to improve women's ability to generate income as well as address agricultural products

and processing. They discovered that it was not enough to teach women skills or to provide them with credit. Women needed to understand how markets work. They needed to know how to market and sell their products.

Then they began to see that the barriers facing women were more than a general lack of knowledge. Women did not understand their economic rights. They did not know how to participate in and how to access markets. They did not have equal standing in the marketplace. Consequently, they moved toward a focus on the process of civil and

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political engagement. Today, Agromart works in 13 districts and is generating interest in a grassroots movement.

Using Agromart as an example, it is important to look at women in politics in a different way. It is critical that those of us who work in this area figure out how the political processes that now occur among elite groups with access to public policy forums can be linked to women across the country who have very real needs and no access. It is these women who also represent a very large base of support.

Agromart is doing two things with The Asia Foundation's support. First, they are publishing the only women's magazine in Sri Lanka with a focus on women's rights, women's political participation, and women's issues — not cooking, flower arranging, or how to get married. Topics include issues ranging from garbage collection to government responsibility. Recent market research showed that women who are unfamiliar with the publication want it when they see it. And so one of our objectives is to work with the publication's staff to help the magazine increase its reach.

Agromart is also involved in advocacy training, which is the second area where The Asia Foundation is helping. It seems women are aware of their rights but too often do not know how to organize or how to come together to form groups. They have lived in isolation within their own

households and communities for so long that they often are not able to generate bonds of solidarity or to create effective organizations.

The Foundation also is working on issues related to elections and women's participation but that do not necessarily focus on women. Here, violence is again a central concern. Since 1977, the Foundation has worked with The Center for Monitoring Election Violence. The process got underway by monitoring elections and increasing the awareness of the impact of violence. The objective also was to create pressure on the political actors.

The effort has been both successful and has generated conflict. It has been successful in the sense that when we began, in 1997, there were over 2,000 incidents of violence during local elections. There were over 1,500 incidents in a single province. Then extensive monitoring and reporting on the violence forced the issue onto the political agenda. As a result, both the political parties and the government began to speak out and take more direct steps to try to control violence. In April, when the last round of elections took place, the level of violence was reduced significantly.

The next step is to capitalize on the awareness among citizens and to mobilize in preparation for next year's parliamentary and presidential elections. 🌱

# Panel II: Questions and Answers

## Panelists

**Carol Yost**, Regional Coordinator, Women's Political Participation, Programs and Director, Global Women in Politics Program, The Asia Foundation

**Julio A. Andrews**, Representative,  
The Asia Foundation, Nepal

**Theresa Loar**, Senior Coordinator, International Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State

**Katherine S. Hunter**, Representative,  
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**Mark Reade McKenna**, Representative,  
The Asia Foundation, Sri Lanka

**Q** If the two key factors are the number of women who vote and the quality of their vote, are there structures in place to show women how they can participate politically but not necessarily run for office?

**Andy Andrews:** In the Nepal context, we must start with political awareness because women are at ground zero. Most women do not even know that they have any rights whatsoever, let alone understand what voting is all about.

Once women achieve that awareness, which is what we found with the program for 90,000 women — the program's first generation — then women realize they have rights, and can contribute insight into legal rights in addition to basic rights. Then we really can begin to look at issues of representation, voting and civic education.

**Q** Has The Asia Foundation evaluated whether better governance results when women exercise their civil rights?

**Andy Andrews:** We do have evidence that the legal literacy and rights programs result in women taking actions for social change within their communities. But we do not know to what extent that is manifested in the electoral process at this point. As I mentioned, we are starting from square one. I would expect evidence of better governance exists in areas where there is more experience with these kinds of programs.

That said, having completed our work with the first 90,000 women in the legal literacy and rights program and as we prepare to train another 130,000 women, we will track these women and their actions to see to what extent these programs demonstrate increased awareness about rights, particularly in the election process and representative government.

**Q** Since women's rights seem to be more controversial than development issues benefiting women, have any of the panelists encountered resistance while pursuing their programs?

**Andy Andrews:** The resistance we faced in Nepal turned up in connection with the women's empowerment program. It is as if women's empowerment became the "flavor of the month." It was widely discussed, but the question remains, what

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exactly is the women's empowerment movement? The Foundation is used to the idea of development programs with a women's component — and now we're talking about an empowerment program. It means we are trying to get a handle on and a definition for empowerment, and this is creating quite a challenge.



What constraints does the relationship between women's NGOs and the Parliament in Mongolia face?

**Katherine S. Hunter:** On the positive side, women NGO's have sought out key linkages. For example, they have found good partners in the eight women members of Parliament. In fact, one member has agreed to introduce the domestic violence legislation in Mongolia. Either a member of parliament, the Office of the President, or the executive branch can initiate legislation.

While there is no explicit constraint against expanding women NGOs' relationship with Parliament, these organizations still have to learn how to mobilize broader support among all members of Parliament and others who can be influential in getting legislation passed. They have to learn how best to conduct this process of mapping out their allies and potential critics and then devising a strategy that enables them to take advantage of the positive opportunities.



Please comment on the sustainability of women's NGOs as well as those NGO's that are not specifically focused for women. Do they effectively address issues of concern to women and girls?

**Katherine S. Hunter:** Sustaining any and all NGOs is a challenge in Mongolia. It is clear that a number of the 1,100 NGOs now in place will not be around forever. Their num-

bers reflect a surge of interest in finding ways to participate following the adoption of the NGO law in 1997.

As a complement to The Asia Foundation's work with women's NGOs, we focus on the organizational development of NGOs generally through our support for the Center for Citizenship Education. The Center has a training and information program that addresses issues exactly like this one and that tries to help particularly young NGOs develop strategies for what they want to accomplish.

In response to the second part of your question, I should mention the structure of the newer NGOs in Mongolia. Many follow the structure of the old "mass" organizations with their headquarters in the capital city and branches at the provincial and county levels. Referring to 30 women's organizations actually understates the number of women's NGOs since so many branches operate fairly independently in rural areas.

The difference between these women's NGOs and other NGOs is basically a division in terms of the issues each addresses. Other NGOs do not work on women's and children's issues within the context of their respective programs, which tend to be more issue based, for example, protection of the environment. The exception are the children's rights groups, which are a separate set of NGOs.



Is anyone tracking what influence the women in Parliament have, what effect the bills they support have, and what the policy outcomes are? Also, what kinds of alliances do they establish and what kinds of positions do they take on issues of gender?

**Katherine S. Hunter:** That very question came up during a recent meeting with a group of seven NGO leaders working to increase the number of women running in the 2000 elections. An interesting facet in the discussion was the fact that

the research you are asking about (analyzing positions of women parliamentarians) has not been done in Mongolia, although it now is possible because the votes of individual members of Parliament are recorded as part of the proceedings. In fact, one of the women NGO leaders commented that there might be surprises in the analysis of women's positions on gender and other issues.

It is an issue that needs to be addressed and in doing so, it will give women another way to promote the positive aspects of women in decisionmaking positions throughout Mongolia.

**Carol Yost:** The Asia Foundation has supported women's leadership both in government and nongovernment positions so that, yes, we want to get more women elected at all levels. But an absolute key to that is strengthening the ability of women and organizations to affect the decisionmaking process.

So, member accountability is part and parcel of our efforts. It is government accountability; it is strengthening the ability of organizations and of women to affect decisionmaking processes and policies and their implementation; it is making sure that we do not do anything in isolation. We have to work on both the supply and demand side.

**Andy Andrews:** The Center for Legislative Development in the Philippines has set up a model for tracking and reporting on the performance of members of Parliament, particularly as they relate to women's issues.

**Audience Comment:** An underlying assumption being made here is that policy will change somehow simply by electing more women into Parliament. This is problematic because women are not all the same. They have identities and interests that cross issues of race, income, and class and that will affect how they vote and influence policy.

Second, it is valid to look at the principles that underpin

an organization. Do their organizing principles in effect stand in the way of social change as that affects the gender equality agenda; do they prevent some women from entering or attaining higher positions within the institution? For me, simply having women in place and running organizations is not the way to go.

If an organization itself is not accountable or if the underlying premises have not been reviewed for how power is exercised, how agendas come together, and how the institution is run, the result can be tyrannical women NGOs. And that is not really what is needed. What is needed is to go beyond awareness raising and look at the institutions, by which I mean the founding principles that these organizations are built on. To what extent are they inclusive; to what extent are they gender biased?



How do you know when you have succeeded and can say, okay, now we can move on to the environment, or some other issue?

**Mark McKenna:** The question is premature. We are so far from success—and the processes for recognizing success are so far out there. Just some of the outstanding questions that require answers are: What do you, as a citizen want to see different in your country? How do you want the system or the process to change?

These are very challenging questions for Sri Lankans—and others elsewhere, too. Change, which ultimately requires seeing your society or social structure in a different light, will be gradual and incremental. To suggest putting a goal post out there that will tell us when we've succeeded is to misconstrue the dynamic of what we are engaged in.

**Carol Yost:** Certainly, we are talking about long-term change. The Asia Foundation adds value through its partnership relationships across Asia with new and old democracies. The

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Foundation has a reputation for working with organizations, helping to analyze their agendas and cooperating to set objectives within the context of democracy.

Our work concentrates on strategic planning, analytical skills, and helping set objectives. We then work with them to measure whether they meet those goals and finally, to analyze why or why not. Part of the process is documenting the experiences and then disseminating that so other organizations can learn from them. So they do not need to constantly reinvent the wheel. Providing opportunities to share information and learn from experience is trademark of all The Asia Foundation's programming.

**Theresa Loar:** We'll know that we are successful when it is commonplace for women to vote, to run for office, and to head NGOs—and when there no longer is a need for a discussion like this. For the time being, I am very optimistic. We are seeing new challenges to democracy and to women's political participation, sometimes in the form of ramifications from a deteriorating economy or because of religious fundamentalism. Still, women are stepping forward and making their voices heard. They are helping shape their democracies. 🌱

# The Participants

## Julio A. Andrews

Representative, Nepal, *The Asia Foundation*

Mr. Andrews is The Asia Foundation's representative for Nepal. He has served with the Foundation for 26 years as Representative in the Pacific Islands, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, the Philippines and Vietnam, and as the Director of Program Operations and Director of the Asian-American Exchange program in San Francisco.

Prior to joining The Foundation, Mr. Andrews was Country Director of the Peace Corps in both Thailand and Ethiopia.

He served as San Francisco State University's Educational Advisor to the U.S. Peace Corps in Liberia. He also was Principal of Crescent Park Elementary School in Palo Alto, California.

Mr. Andrews received his MA from California State University at San Francisco and his BA from California State University at San Jose.

## Katherine S. Hunter

Representative, Mongolia, *The Asia Foundation*

Ms. Hunter is The Asia Foundation's Representative in Mongolia. She joined the Foundation in 1988 as a Program Officer with the Center for Asian Pacific Affairs. She has since served on the South Asia desk in the Programs Division, with the Women's Political Participation theme, and as Assistant Representative in Bangladesh and Mongolia.

Prior to joining the Foundation, Ms. Hunter worked for the University of Alaska's Northwest Community College in Nome, where she served as Library Director, Survey Coordinator of the Nome Historic District, and as an Adjunct Instructor of History for students in the Bering Strait region.

Ms. Hunter received her MA from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at The John Hopkins University, her Master's of Museum Practice from the University of Michigan, and her BA from Mount Holyoke College.

## Theresa Loar

Senior Coordinator, *International Women's Issues*,  
U.S. Department of State

Ms. Loar is the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues at the U.S. Department of State. A foreign service officer, she was appointed as a delegate to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women.

After the Conference, she was appointed by President Clinton to her present position with a mandate to promote the advancement of women internationally. She has directed President Clinton's Inter-Agency Council on Women, which coordinated the follow-up to U.S. commitments made during the UN conference in Beijing.

## Mark Reade McKenna

Representative, Sri Lanka, *The Asia Foundation*

Mr. McKenna is The Asia Foundation Representative in Sri Lanka. He is responsible for developing the Foundation's program strategy in Sri Lanka as it relates to human rights, the rule of law, conflict resolution, economic reform and women's economic and political participation. Prior to his current position, Mr. McKenna worked for seven years as The Asia Foundation's Assistant Representative in Pakistan, where he directed the Pakistan NGO Initiative, a program which fosters nongovernmental and community-based organizations in the areas of women's economic and social empowerment, community participation, coalition building, and advocacy.

Mr. McKenna also has worked for The Asia Foundation in Fiji, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and San Francisco. He has extensive experience conceptualizing, managing, and implementing projects that are related to court management, judicial training, access to justice, and democratic institution building.

Mr. McKenna received his MA from San Francisco State University and his BA from the University of California at Berkeley.

## Carol Yost

Regional Coordinator, Women's Political Participation Programs and Director, Global Women in Politics Program *The Asia Foundation*

Carol Yost is the regional coordinator for The Asia Foundation's Women's Political Participation programs, and Director of the Global Women in Politics Program. The program supports in-country, regional, and cross-regional initiatives in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to increase women's participation in political processes.

Ms. Yost holds a Master's degree from American University and a Bachelor's degree from Denison University.

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