

BOOK REVIEW

Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments.
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As a discipline, we know very little about the experience of women in parliaments across Asia, even though the region is home to “three-fifths of the world’s population” (1) and the world’s first female prime minister (Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Sri Lanka, 1960). In part, this may be because—in the aggregate—women’s political presence in this region has tended to sit “in the middle” of global rankings: not high enough to warrant “best practice” accounts, yet not low enough to become a focal point of development concern. Our limited collective understanding, however, may also reflect the Euro-American focus of our discipline, which has historically set the standard of what counts as “good research.” Academics who sit and write outside these theoretical frameworks and interpretative lens have been rendered less visible.

Devin K. Joshi and Christian Echle’s edited collection, *Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments*, therefore represents a significant contribution to our understanding of women’s experiences across 10 very diverse parliaments: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan (in East Asia); Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste (in Southeast Asia); and Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (in South Asia). Mikiko Eto and Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan, writing on Japan and Malaysia, respectively, explicitly refer to their studies as the “first” on the substantive representation of women (SRW) in those countries (28, 121), although this would also be the case for a number of other chapters.

The collection begins with Joshi’s description of the Asian context, defined in terms of its widespread “patriarchal bureaucratization of power,” which has accounted for “women’s formal exclusion from political institutions,” and the high number of states that can still be classified as “non-democracies, semi-democracies, and newly emerging democracies” (6). Each chapter then follows a similar structure, beginning with a discussion of political and cultural contexts, including legislative and policy efforts to advance gender equality more broadly, followed by descriptions of the individuals surveyed for the study. These are

some of the liveliest parts of the book, showcasing the lived experiences of individual members of parliament (MPs)—women and men—and their perceptions of the status of women’s rights in their country. The chapters then present the parliamentary context and the degree to which these institutions—through formal and informal processes, rules, and norms—support gender equality work. The analysis of parliamentary committees and, where they exist, women’s caucuses in each chapter is particularly rich and informative. Before concluding, the chapters address the importance of understanding women parliamentarians’ experiences—and indeed, SRW—through an intersectional lens.

This fascinating collection shows that in the absence of a critical mass of women parliamentarians, a diverse group of critical actors are driving gender equality reforms in Asia. While legislative efforts have largely focused on gender-based violence and promoting women’s participation in political and economic life, these initiatives pass with the support of men, and in some cases, because men introduce them. Unsurprisingly, these reforms are also driven by critical parliamentary outsiders. Prominent examples discussed in the collection include the Gender Equality Commission in Taiwan (81), the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality in Malaysia (124), Women’s Legal Aid in Indonesia (121), and the loose coalition of NGOs that make up the Timorese women’s movement (162).

The discussion in each chapter of the political and institutional dynamics that both enable and hinder gender equality reforms is compelling and original. Ki-young Shin’s description of “negotiation group-centrism” in South Korea, or the process by which the major political parties control committee dynamics and legislative agendas, clearly outlines the challenge for women MPs in presenting and passing progressive bills, or any agenda that does not already have a “notable level of social consensus” (58). In Indonesia, the obstacles to gender equality legislation are not quite institutional as they are cultural. As Ella S. Prihatini notes in her chapter, women MPs seeking to mainstream gender equality in various committee debates are blocked by a lack of understanding of the relevance of gender equality to those debates (the example of agriculture is given on page 102) and the continued “foreignness” of the idea of gender equality to some members.

Intersectionality—a crosscutting theme throughout the book—is clearly understood in different ways in each context. While in most countries, the term is represented by variables of geography (i.e., urban/rural), age, and class, only in a few is it understood as relating to indigenous people and/or those with a disability. More rarely is there an explicit analysis of LGBTIQ+ peoples, underscoring the political sensitivities of these issues still evident in some parts of Asia.

Experience of bullying, sexual harassment, and intimidation appears to be more widespread: 44% of women MPs (and 31% of men MPs) interviewed had experienced (or witnessed) some form of bullying, harassment, or gender stereotyping in parliament (255). Even when parliamentarians themselves indicated that there was “no problem” with sexism, they were still subject to gendered innuendo and ridicule both in parliamentary chambers and in traditional and social media. Clearly, there is more to do to ensure the safety, and legitimacy, of women MPs in Asian parliaments.

Finally, this collection merits some praise for the process by which it was put together during a pandemic. It is particularly noteworthy that the substantive chapters were written by local researchers in each country, bar one (Sara Niner in Timor-Leste, although even in this case, Niner clearly has vast country-specific experience). In this sense, the research process privileged Asian voices and languages in data gathering and analysis. There is an unmistakable Asian flair in the writing and the conclusions that brings a sense of authenticity to the research. Joshi also explains that the research team met online once or twice a month while the authors were writing “to give each other advice, feedback and support” (10). This is role-model editorial practice, particularly in a time of isolation exacerbated by international border closures. There is, then, much to learn—substantively and methodologically—from this collection.

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