WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN ASIA: TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS*

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Abstract

Women in politics is not just about getting women into elective and appointive positions in government. It is also about getting half of the world's population to assert their rights and exercise their responsibilities for their own welfare and future—and, that of their children and the generations that will follow (Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics, 1997).

Introduction

During the last decades, women around the world have made significant gains in their struggle for gender equality and empowerment. Economic and social indicators of human development have shown some improvements in their economic status. Women have had better access to non-traditional and better paid occupations, credit, and technologies. Their educational status, average life expectancy, and overall health situation have also improved *(Population Reference Bureau,* 1998). However, women's access to empowering opportunities is often constrained and mediated by class, nationality, ethnic, and gender factors. Notwithstanding the many laudable efforts of the women's movement around the world and spirited support of some civil society groups and government agencies, much has yet to be done to fully realize the goals of gender equality.

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The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 underscored the many problems of women brought about by cultural factors and the inability of governments to enact policies and develop programs that could effectively respond to these problems. Some of the issues raised in the Conference were:

- Out of 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty, over 70 percent are women (*UNDP* 1995);
- Over the past two decades the economic participation of women have substantially increased in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa and eastern Asia. The economic activities of men, on the other hand, have declined everywhere except in Central Asia (*Stirrings* 1996:5);
- "When women enter previously male occupations, the status of these occupations falls" (*Stirrings* 1996:5);
- The increased participation of women in paid work has not resulted in equitable share of wages. Most women still earn 50–80 percent of the earnings of men (*UN Fact Sheet* 1995);
- UN estimates of unpaid housework are between 10–35 percent of GDP worldwide (*Stirrings* 1996:6);
- Nearly 600,000 women die every year from pregnancy-related causes. Although the ratio of maternal deaths to live births varies enormously throughout the world, the problem is most serious in Asia and Africa (*Population Reference Bureau* 1998);
- Women across the world suffer from various forms of gender violence—wife battery, rape, sex trafficking, and reproductive health problems due to lack of power over their bodies and control of reproduction;
- Every year, about 100,000 women die as a result of unsafe illegal abortions (*Facts and Figures 1994–1995* UNICEF;

- Women and children fleeing conflict, constitute 80 percent of the 23 million refugees and 26 million displaced persons in the world today (*Platform for Action, Fourth World Conference on Women,* United Nations, 1995);
- Children and women bear the brunt of war. During the past decade, more than 1.5 million children have been killed, over 4 million permanently disabled, 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents, and 12 million left homeless (*Facts and Figures 1994–1995,* UNICEF);
- Ninety countries have not yet accepted all the tenets of legal equality for women and men (*Human Development Report 1995,* UN Development Programme).

Asian Women's Role in Leadership and Decision Making

What clearly underlies the persistence of structural impediments to the full realization of women's human development is their poor participation in decision making. Very few have always been in key leadership and management positions. As such, allocations of resources, prioritization of programs, and framing of national goals and development strategies have been carried out with little consideration of women's views, feelings, and aspirations. In Asia, women occupied only 11 percent (1998) of positions in parliament and five percent (1996) of ministerial and subministerial posts. And even if the number of economically productive women has substantially risen in the last years, global data indicate that they hold only 10 to 30 percent of management positions, and less than five percent of very high positions. *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, 1995* by the United Nations claims that "at the current rate of progress, it would take 475 years for women to reach equality with men as senior managers."

There are enormous obstacles, both at the individual and structural levels that prevent women from entering and staying in politics. These include the persistence of patriarchal and sexist values and practices, both inside and outside the home. Stereotype ideas about "proper" and "natural", mas-

Women in Public Life (Population Reference Bureau 1998)

Country	Percent of Women in Parliament (January, 1998)	Percent of Women in Ministerial and Sub-Ministerial Offices (1996)
All Asia	11	5
Southeast Asia	12	6
Cambodia	6	2
Indonesia	11	2
Laos	–	4
Malaysia	10	8
Myanmar	–	0
Philippines	12	23
Singapore	5	7
Thailand	7	2
Vietnam	26	5
East Asia	17	5
China	21	4
Japan	8	9
Korea North	20	1
Korea South	3	1
Mongolia	8	2
Taiwan	–	–

culine and feminine roles still strongly influence career options and people's choice of their leaders. Female political candidates do not win in elections because of sexist beliefs that those feminine qualities and skills are not appropriate for highly sensitive and important posts. Only women who

come from political families and are wealthy enough to mar-
shal awesome resources against sexist attacks make it.
Kanwaljit Soin, a founding member of the Association of
Women for Action and Research in Singapore, also notes that:

> ... these stereotypes can in effect "excuse" discrimination, e.g.,
> underrepresentation of women in political office is often "ex-
> plained" by the stereotype of their being uninterested in power
> and politics. The reality that is often overlooked is that the
> struggle by women to provide themselves and their families on
> a day-to-day basis limits women's time and energy for political
> activism. The other reason that women are absent is because
> gender stereotypes establishes leadership as a masculine activ-
> ity (1994:10).

The highly masculine construction and demands of politics
also make it extremely difficult for women to stay and enjoy
their terms of office. Many have suffered in silence, enduring
the emotional battery, insults, and sexist remarks of male peers
and the media. In a paper read at the Third Asia-Pacific Con-
gress of Women in Politics in Fiji on November 21, 1996,
Marilyn Waring of New Zealand wrote:

> I am sitting over there remaining completely silent about the
> universal emotional battery of women who hold office. And it
> is battery, constant, daily. . . In Parliament. . . the woman min-
> ister endures taunts about whether or not she feels pumped
> up, and frequent irrelevant interjections ask whether or not
> she wishes to swap her keys (In CAPWIP, 1997:11).

Marilyn Waring narrated in the same paper the experience of
Indira Gandhi when she first appeared before the Lok Sabha
in March 1966. It was a time of economic crisis, "unparal-
leled drought, the renewed Indo-Pakistan war and the cessa-
tion of US aid." Gandhi was "strained and jittery and did not
speak confidently." The Opposition members of Parliament
interrupted her and nicknamed her the "Dumb Doll," an in-
sult she had to live with for many years afterwards. Waring

also mentioned about the experience of Mitsui Mariko who filled up a vacant post in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly in 1987. "The mass media described her as a 'Madonna' who magnificently transformed herself from mere high school teacher into an assemblywoman" (CAPWIP, 1997:12).

Perhaps all women leaders, at one point in their political career, went through similar experiences. Our former President Corazon Aquino, for example, got many insulting nicknames. She was called a "fishwife" whenever she forcefully defended her views and a "coward hiding under her bed," during a failed coup attempt. Her participatory and consultative styles of leadership were taken as signs of weakness and "feminine" incompetence. However, male leaders who adopt the same leadership styles are praised for their sensitivity to democratic principles.

Women generally shy away from politics, therefore, either due to personal dislike of the ways of getting into power, or due to self-perception of a lack of the traits and skills compatible with current political culture. In the Philippines, traditional politics has been associated with the use of "goons, guns, and gold." Campaign funds are raised through gambling, prostitution, and trading of prohibited drugs. Moreover, electorates do not vote on the basis of issues and political standpoints. Kinship relations and patronage politics continue to be the key determinants of election outcomes. The lack of political awareness of voters about gender issues and the need for gender sensitive and responsive leaders perpetuate the male-centered culture of decision making and development planning.

Jung Sook Kim, a political activist from South Korea, notes that East Asian women, particularly Korean women, are not generally interested in politics. She adds that:

In most East Asian countries, the women electorate used to and . . . still constitute a large proportion of the undermined voters during election. They tend to become the target of corrupt election campaign practices . . . money, violence and black rumors. They are mobilized during election time as volunteers with the candidates (giving) many campaign promises. As soon as the election is over, however, the women electorate is forgotten.

The other factors that hinder the participation of women, especially poor women, in politics include the lack of financial resources, inadequate family and social support, lack of female political models, competing demands of childcare and related domestic responsibilities, resistance of husbands and lack of political skills (ABC/Nepal and Women Awareness Centre Nepal, 1995; UNIFEM, 1997; National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, 1996).

Advancing Women's Gender Interests Through Transformative Politics

Feminists and advocates of women's political empowerment agree that the gains of the last decades were basically along the areas of meeting women's practical needs. Very little change has come about in advancing women's strategic interests and creating the conditions for institutionalizing gender fairness and equality in access as well as enjoyment of the benefits of development. To address strategic needs, it is necessary to examine the ideological assumptions of current patterns of gender relations in all spheres of life — domestic and public. As such, while the issue of political participation often starts with demands for increased number of female representation in leadership positions, it does not end there. The more strategic and transformative agenda is for women to challenge the **values and contents, priorities, structures, and processes of politics and governance.**

The disapppointing results of earlier movements for nationalism, democracy, and socialism to advance women's gender interest, have moved some women's movements in Asia to articulate a feminist vision of political transformation. The 1985 pre-Nairobi writings of a Southern Women's Network expressed that:

> We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women's values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships. In such a world women's reproductive role will be redefined: Child care will be shared by men, women and society as a whole. We want a world where massive resources now used in the production of the means of destruction will be diverted to areas where they will help to relieve oppression both inside and outside the home. . . . We want a world *where all institutions are open to participatory democratic processes,* where women share in determining priorities and decisions. . . . Only by sharpening the links between equality, development and peace, can we show that the "basic rights" of the poor and the transformation of institutions that subordinate women are inextricably linked. They can be achieved together through the self-empowerment of women (Gita Sen and Caren Grown 1987 in Jahan 1998:16).

The foregoing statement clearly articulates the Asian feminist agenda for transformative politics. This kind of politics challenges the use of power to promote agression, coercion, and exploitative hierarchies. Peace and development must be pursued through participatory and consultative processes, with the poor and other marginalized sectors in the forefront of democratic aspirations. For women to participate in leadership in the most meaningful and relevant ways, they should

commit to the values of "excellence, integrity, accountabil-
ity, gender equality, sustainable development and peace"
(CAPWIP, 1997). This entails a recognition of the intricate
interconnectedness of life forms with the environment; the
interdependence of all human life—people of different so-
cial classes, ethnicity and gender. In short, women leaders of
Asia must forcefully fight for gender equality and assert the
responsibility of society to protect women's human rights.

Strategies for Promoting Women's Gender Interests in Politics

Several strategies have been employed by women's groups
across the world to promote women's participation in deci-
sion making. These include advocacy for quotas as well as
setting deadlines and targets to fast-track the entry of women
leaders in critical decision making areas (Jahan 1998).
Through affirmative action, government and political parties
have been encouraged to allocate slots for women candidates
and install enabling mechanisms (i.e., campaign funds, skills
enhancement training, support staff). In Asian countries like
the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, women's groups
have played a major role in laying the groundwork for women's
entry into leadership positions. They have actively gone into
networking and alliance building with other civil society
groups, influenced media, the church, and other powerful
blocs.

One of the most effective strategies for advancing trans-
formative politics has been through mainstreaming of the
Gender and Development (GAD) approach in the develop-
ment plans and priorities of governments. This approach has
influenced policy makers and implementers to reformulate
development goals, strategies and targets for possible gender

biases and examine national priorities (i.e., military) buildup, infrastructure development, debt repayment) vis-a-vis those articulated by women's groups. The current enthusiasm by many public and private organizations to address gender issues like reproductive health, gender violence, high unemployment rates for women, and sex trafficking has been largely the result of gender mainstreaming strategies in development work.

Engaging Mainstream Modes of Leadership and Conflict Resolution

The feminist framework of leadership and politics calls for bottom to top and participatory processes. These principles are closely linked to such values as transparency, inclusiveness, and diversity. Jahan (1998:20) stresses that "discrimination is difficult when governance processes are open, inclusive and participatory." An effective leader has listening and attending skills and is able to foster an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect. Jahan also calls for the dynamic interaction between the local and national units of government, to ensure that the needs of the grassroots are truly addressed and integrated into development programs. Finally, the management and resolution of conflicts must be done without use of physical force and military power.

In 1994, a group of women from the Asia-Pacific region came together to work for the advancement of women's political participation. The initial assessment and consultation meetings led to the establishment of a regional network called the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP). The primary goal of this organization is to "create a critical mass of competent, committed and effective women politicians . . . as well as develop a responsible women's citizenry" (CAPWIP, 1998:1). The 1994 Congress

in Manila was participated by 237 women from 23 countries. Succeeding congresses were held in Huairou, Beijing in 1995; Fiji in 1996, and Taipei in 1997. These sessions helped crystallize the groups' strategies to go beyond increasing participation rates and work towards the advancement of transformative politics and governance in the Asian region.

CAPWIP frames its organizational agenda along lines that require a total reconceptualization of politics and governance. It asserts that:

> Women of the Asia-Pacific region want politics that is both transformed and transformational. Transformed because it uses power to create change, to develop people and to build communities; it is non-hierarchical and participatory in its structures and processes; it accords priority to the disadvantaged sectors such as rural, grassroots and indigenous women. It is transformational because it is issue-based, development-oriented and gender responsive; it seeks economic, social and political equity between genders and among sectors; and it builds a society that is just and humane, and a way of life that is sustainable.

The strategies to achieve the foregoing commitments include the (a) development and advocacy of a women's agenda; (b) organizing and networking at all levels—worldwide, regional, country, and community; (c) building the machinery to support women in politics; (d) advocacy for electoral reforms; and (e) advocacy for the integration or mainstreaming of women's development goals and action plans. These strategies are sustained through continuous awareness raising and training, research, and advocacy work. Recently, the organization has also gone into fund-raising activities for women candidates. Its Platform for Action specifically calls for (a) affirmative action; at least one-third representation in appointive, elected, and decision-making bodies; (b) increased funding for political education and skills

development of women; (c) electoral reforms to fix ceilings on expenditure, control of violence, voter registration, and fair canvassing of votes; and (d) incorporation of gender issues into mainstream political agenda.

To summarize, the participation of Asian women in politics, both as leaders and followers, will be more meaningful if it will go beyond establishing quotas and numerical targets. What is more important, as the next century draws near, is to transform human values and relationships. Political culture must be reinvented to give way for the exercise of truly participatory and gender fair governance and leadership.

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