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# Advancing Women's Political Participation

*Asian Consultation on Gender Equality  
& Political Empowerment*

*December 9-10, 2016  
Bali, Indonesia*

# Background Information

Even though gender equality and women's empowerment are currently at the heart of the global agenda, the road ahead is still long and challenging. While international human rights mechanisms provide a valid framework to advance the protection of women and to reduce the gaps for inequality, more efforts are needed. The realm of politics has been considered as one of the most challenging spheres of the public life for women to enter and their participation in parliament is crucial for fair representation of women in society.

In this light, it is only timely to focus on an alternative policy agenda to address the root causes of inequality, including looking at the intersectionality of multiple inequalities and processes of discrimination. In addition, it is fundamental that the efforts and the core instruments from the regional organizations, including conventions, resolutions, legal instruments and programmatic agendas move beyond the identification of the causes and impediments towards the achievement of gender equality, but to the design and systematic implementation of gender responsive measures/mechanisms to guarantee equality and prevent gender based discrimination.

The Community of Democracies, from the moment of its inception in 2000, has been actively supporting activities and projects dedicated to women's empowerment and gender equality. The Warsaw Declaration, the founding document of the Community of Democracies, underlines that "Informed participation by all elements of society, men and women, in a country's economic and political life, including by persons belonging to minority groups, is fundamental to a vibrant and durable democracy." Democracy should transform power relations between men and women in such a manner that gender equality is promoted in terms of inclusiveness, participation, representativeness and accountability of democratic processes and institutions. The universal principle of equality and non-discrimination between women and men forms one of the major global commitments in the pursuit of gender equality in democracy building.

To support women's participation in politics, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD) implemented the project on "Advancing Women's Political Participation", funded by the Republic of Korea and organized in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International IDEA. Through dialogue, the project provided an opportunity for participants from all over the world to discuss and compare the challenges and successes that women face in politics and look for ways to propel the idea of women's political participation forward. It consisted of five regional consultations organized in 2016-2017 in Strasbourg (France), Johannesburg (South Africa), Tunis (Tunisia), Bali (Indonesia) and Mexico City (Mexico).

The Regional Consultations on Gender Equality and Political Empowerment of Women served as platforms created to enhance a multilateral dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the legal frameworks, as well as the exchange of best practices to take specific actions to address the main issues related to the advancement of Gender Equality and the Political Participation of Women.

The project aims to produce a global and regional policy recommendations and contribute to the policy guidebook based on input collected from the five regional consultations. The guidebook is a part of the Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) and provides recommendations on how to efficiently advance women's political participation.

# Introduction

The Asia-Pacific Consultation brought together representatives of international institutions, non-governmental organizations, and civil society groups active in the Asia-Pacific region, along with female members of national parliaments, to discuss gender equality and women's political empowerment, examine case studies and produce a set of recommendations for furthering women's engagement in politics in Asia.

This report consists of three sections of relevant experiences and lessons learned on gender equality and the political empowerment of women: 1) challenges to overcome in the region; 2) existing tools and mechanisms; and 3) best practices and recommendations on how to effectively advance women's political participation.

Asia-Pacific is a huge and diverse region, and to a large extent, underdeveloped. Many Asian countries have made formal commitments to advance women's rights, but most of these commitments remain far short of the set goals. The focus of decision makers in most Asian countries is on issues concerning security, development, agriculture, access to justice, and health. Yet despite incidents of gender-based violence, including human trafficking, exploitation and rape, lack of strong gender equality binding instruments holds women from being fully active in society.

There has been note-worthy, visible progress in advancing women's rights, especially since the Beijing Declaration in 1995. In the 1990s, the average number of women elected to parliaments was 10%, while today it is 20%.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there has been progress in women's representation among cabinet ministers – from an average of 5% in the 1990s to 20% today. However, Nepal, Taiwan, and the Marshall Islands are the only Asia-Pacific countries currently with female heads of state.

Despite visible progress in the number of women elected to political office in different corners of the world, the Asia-Pacific regions lag behind in the number of female representatives in government. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union shows that in 2016, the world average of women participating in parliament was 23%, while in Asia it is 13% and in the Pacific region in is 17%. Remarkably, however, in 2016 the greatest gains made by women in parliament were in the Pacific, a region that has traditionally lagged behind others in terms of women's political leadership:

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<sup>1</sup> Women in Parliament: 20 Years in Review. Report. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015.

the regional average of women in parliament (both houses combined) increased by 1.6 percentage points from 15.8% in 2015 to 17.4% in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

The 2016 Global Gender Gap Index measures progress on gender equality in economic participation, education, political participation and health. Only one Asian country ranked in the top 40, with the Philippines ranked seventh. Across the various sub-regions, most countries rank quite low, reflecting large gender gaps across these indicators, from 43<sup>rd</sup> in Laos to 116<sup>th</sup> in South Korea. The Index shows Central Asia's gender gap at 30%, East Asia and the Pacific at 31.7%, and South Asia at 33% – which compares to an average gap of 27% in Western Europe and North America.

Many women face discriminatory laws, such as in Myanmar, where there is not a single article about gender equality in the constitution, and in Kazakhstan, where there is no definition of sexual harassment. Furthermore, in Asia, there are few reviewing mechanisms at the regional level to check the level of progress in implementing gender equality than exist in other parts of the globe. Participants at the Consultation were united in the belief that gender equality should not be a goal in itself, but a cross-cutting issue entrenched in every aspect of policy making in Asia.

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<sup>2</sup> Women in Parliament in 2016: The Year in Review (p. 2, Rep.). (2017). Inter-Parliamentary Union.

# PART I: Challenges to be overcome to advance women's political participation

Many countries in Asia still lack solid democratic structures, comprehensive electoral laws, and other instruments necessary for healthy democratic governance. In addition to these institutional issues, several other obstacles to women's political participation in the Asian region were cited and discussed during the Consultation.

**First**, gender stereotypes are a pervasive problem throughout Asia. The idea that women should be relegated to the household and family duties continues to prevail. Cultural attitudes and gender bias against women in public life mean that political parties tend to prefer male candidates and women face serious challenges in raising sufficient funds to run electoral campaigns. As a result, when women do run in elections, they rarely face a level playing field.

**Second**, women experience great difficulties in even being nominated as candidates. Most women do not even entertain the idea of running for office. Since 2001, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat has conducted 20 electoral missions to 10 member countries in order to identify electoral trends, including voting behaviors, in the Pacific region. Among the lessons learned is that while there are country-specific challenges, there are common challenges across the countries observed, including low levels of civic awareness and low levels of women's participation in elections. In the course of these missions, educated women were asked why they have not considered running for office.

Some of their responses include:

- Lack of resources and inadequate support from political parties for women candidates, compared to support for male candidates;
- Fear of potential loss of income for the family. Women generally are more reluctant to give up well-paid and/or secure employment for lower-paying public office positions, where there is often a significant gender pay-gap;
- Reluctance to expose themselves to increased public scrutiny as public figures, particularly in the public realm. While men also face public scrutiny, women are expected to maintain unreasonably high standards of conduct compared to their male counterparts;
- Strong and prevailing cultural mindsets, even among women, that holding political office is a man's job.

**Third**, lack of education is a severe problem in Asia, particularly for women and girls. In several Asian countries, such as Myanmar, Bangladesh and parts of India, many girls do not attend school. This is often attributed to customary or religious law, despite state laws requiring parents to send their children to school. One result is that many women are not even aware of the rights and protections they hold in their respective countries. Another consequence is a lack of civic awareness, among both men and women, which is critical for promoting and advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, especially in terms of political representation.

**Fourth**, despite being party to international agreements on gender equality and women's empowerment, many states have not lived up to their obligations. While many countries in the region have ratified international treaties such as the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), few have transformed these commitments into policies and government strategies for empowering women and many lack constitutional provisions on gender equality. Gender disaggregated data is typically not collected, impeding monitoring and evaluation of state commitments to promote gender equality as stipulated in international agreements.

## PART II: Existing mechanisms to advance women's political participation

Attendees of the Consultation agreed that excluding half the population from decision-making poses serious problems for the region. One of the consequences is that, without the participation of women, environmental, peace and security challenges – areas that garner the most attention in the Asian region – cannot be addressed and dealt with effectively. Attendee discussed several mechanisms and actions, both at the local and international level, which could effectively improve women's political participation and gender equality in the Asia region.

### International Treaties, Charters, and Declarations

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, is an international bill of rights for women and a legally binding instrument obliging states to promote gender equality. At present, there are 189 states parties, making CEDAW an important tool for national and international advocates of gender equality.

Article 7 specifically addresses the elimination of gender discrimination in political and public life, stating:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

In 1997, the CEDAW Committee issued General Recommendation No. 23 to elaborate on Article 7, making a stronger case for “temporary special measures” (for example, gender quotas) to achieve equality of participation. The Recommendation states that the “formal removal of barriers and the introduction of temporary special measures to encourage the equal participation of both men and women in the public life of their societies are essential prerequisites to true equality in political life.” It also notes that states parties, political parties, and public officials should actively encourage women's full and effective participation, together with all other sectors of society.



The Beijing Platform for Action, signed unanimously by all UN member states at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, lists Women in Power and Decision-Making among its twelve Strategic Objectives. Under this Objective, states commit to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making, as well as to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

**Paragraph 190a calls on governments to:**

Commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia, setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions.

**Paragraph 191, in turns, urges political parties to:**

- Consider examining party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women;
- Consider developing initiatives that allow women to participate fully in all internal policy-making structures and appointive and electoral nominating processes;
- Consider incorporating gender issues in their political agenda, taking measures to ensure that women can participate in the leadership of political parties on an equal basis with men.

## International Organizations

**The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)** has supported women in politics in all areas of the globe, including Asia. Its work includes raising awareness among women who wish to enter the political realm; working with male leaders and political parties to gain their support for women in politics; training female candidates ahead of elections, for instance on navigating gender stereotypes and improving their public speaking skills; and liaising with local NGOs to provide gender-balanced analysis of elections and electoral trends.

In Indonesia, for example, UNDP implemented a project that trained female candidates and, after the elections, worked with the newly elected female MPs to build their individual capacities as well as to strengthen the parliamentary women's caucus.

## Regional Organizations

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted a Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN region in 1988, which promotes the equitable and effective participation of women in all fields and at various levels of political, economic, social, and cultural life. The ASEAN Committee on Women Work Plan for 2016–2020 includes a focus on increasing the number of women in leadership positions in all ASEAN member states, particularly in appointed and elected positions.

**Leaders in the Pacific region signed a Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration** in 2012, committing themselves to the implementation of specific national policy actions aimed at advancing gender equality in government programs and policies. With respect to women in decision-making, the agreement called for the adoption of temporary special measures (TSMs), like reserved seats and political party reforms, to accelerate women’s full and equal participation in governance at all levels.

Since the adoption of the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, the Pacific Islands Forum has tracked visible progress in implementing these commitments of the Declaration.

**Four indicators were identified when measuring the level of women’s participation in all levels of decision making:**

1. Seats held by women in national parliaments;
2. Seats held by women in local governments;
3. Women’s representation in senior management roles in the public sector;
4. Women’s representation on state-owned boards.

**The tracking reports recorded progress** in relation to each of these four indicators, observing some notable developments:

- The introduction of gender-inclusive parliamentary committees, policies and procedures;
- The introduction of temporary special measures in local government systems in Australia, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Vanuatu;
- An increase in the number of women contesting elections in Tonga, the Marshall Islands and the Solomon Islands.

## The State

**Electoral gender quotas** are a tool used by many states to promote gender equality and women's participation. Quotas were the subject of extensive discussion during the Consultation, and were viewed both as a mechanism to promote women's participation in politics and as a way to change traditional thinking about the role of women in government.

**The Quota Project** – a joint initiative between International IDEA, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Stockholm University – has classified gender quotas into three categories:

- Reserved seats stipulate a minimum number of women to be elected. There are several ways a reserved seat can be filled, including election in districts specifically designated for female parliamentarians; on all-women national party lists; and indirectly based on a party's share of national votes. The existence of reserved seats for women, importantly, does not preclude women's election to non-reserved seats. In some countries, indeed, women are limited to serving only one or two terms as reserved seat MPs;
- Legislated candidate quotas require that all political parties include a minimum proportion of women – or maximum and/or minimum shares of one sex – among their nominated candidates. Legislated quotas generally appear in constitutions, electoral laws, or political party laws. Unlike reserved seats, these laws do not guarantee outcomes in terms of the share of women elected. The most successful quotas tend to be those with high percentages of required female candidates (30% or more), mandates with regard to the placement of female candidates, and sanctions that compel parties to meet quota requirements;
- Party candidate quotas entail voluntary pledges by political parties to include a minimum percentage of women – or maximum and/or minimum shares of one sex – among their candidates. These quotas tend to be institutionalized in party constitutions and statutes, but may also exist in less formal forms as well. With little outside oversight, these quotas are highly varied in terms of their impact on the numbers of party women elected – while their overall impact depends on the size of the party adopting them.

Quotas tend to work differently under different electoral systems. Legislated and party quotas are more easily introduced and applied in proportional representation systems. Because these systems allow for multiple candidates to stand and be elected to any one constituency, quotas can enable greater numbers of women to be elected as political parties may nominate – and elect – both men and women on their lists. Candidate quotas may be more difficult to apply in plurality-majority systems, as parties must select women over men as districts tend to elect only one member. However, for these same reasons, reserved seats may be a good fit in countries with majoritarian electoral systems.

Examples of quotas discussed during the Consultation include Samoa and Nepal. Samoa amended its constitution in 2013 to reserve five seats for women in the national parliament, amounting to 10% of all MPs. The system is distinct from that employed in many other countries, as the quota is activated only after the election results are known. If fewer than five women are elected, additional seats are added to parliament and awarded to the unsuccessful female candidates with the highest number of votes. In the 2016 elections, a record number of women stood as candidates, with four women winning their constituencies. A fifth woman, who came in second in her district – was awarded a seat due to the quota.

In Nepal, a 33% legislated quota was introduced for elections to the Constituent Assembly in 2014. Parties initiated failed to nominate the required proportion of women, leading the Election Commission to refuse to register these lists, forcing parties to prepare new lists. The elections, in turn, resulted in 29% women in the new Constituent Assembly.

# PART III: Recommendations on how to effectively advance women's political participation

The Consultation participants discussed some of the possible solutions and directions governments, civil society, local and regional organizations should take to promote gender equality and women's political participation. They produced the following set of recommendations.

**First**, achieving gender equality must begin with efforts to ensure with equitable access to social protection, as well as developing and implementing frameworks, guidelines and mechanisms to eliminate all forms of discrimination. This includes passing legislation, amending constitutions, and repealing all laws that limit women's rights and prevent them from participating in all aspects of society.

**Second**, working to eliminate gender-based stereotypes is fundamental in promoting women's rights and empowerment in the Asian region. Widely held beliefs that women are more suited toward child-rearing and maintaining the household prevent women from entering politics, which is instead seen as a male space.

**Third**, men must play a role in dispelling gender-based stereotypes and promoting women's participation in politics. Men in all sectors of society – politicians, religious leaders, security officials, businessmen, and the media – are key to eliminating traditional mindsets towards women and convincing others of the important role women play in the public sphere. While awaiting broader cultural transformation, in the short term, in these patriarchal societies, endorsement of or praise for a woman candidate for office may significantly increase her chance of getting elected.

**Fourth**, political parties are one of the key instruments to implementing change in the political arena. Research has shown that traditional political party leadership is one of the primary obstacles to women's participation. There must be a shift in traditional political party thinking and behavior with parties that actively promote women's participation and leadership.

**Fifth**, enforcement of international conventions and treaties would result in a significant increase in the number of women in politics. CEDAW has had a clear impact in several countries in formulating gender equality policies. Advocacy by international and non-governmental organizations, along with strong monitoring and oversight, can transform international commitments into laws and constitutional amendments prohibiting gender discrimination.

**Sixth**, temporary special measures like gender quotas have spread across the region. However reserved seats provisions have tended to ensure only a small percentage of women in parliament, while legislated quotas vary greatly in their impact on the numbers of women elected. Making legislated quotas more effective requires mandating that women be placed in ‘electable’ positions, for example through placement mandates, as well as imposing sanctions for non-compliance, like refusal to register a political party that has not complied with the quota law or reduction in public financing of political parties proportionate to the gap. With such provisions, parties are less likely to nominate and elect more women.

**Finally**, for the most effective results, electoral gender quotas should be accompanied by a range of other measures in order to further women’s participation in politics, including:

- Equitable media coverage for female candidates for office, and media (both traditional and social) that moves beyond gender stereotypes when it interacts with women MPs;
- Advocacy campaigning, lobbying and support from women’s organizations and civil society for women running for office;
- Capacity development programs for women interested in entering politics;
- Campaign finance support for female candidates;
- Monitoring and accountability mechanisms for gender equality, along with legal and policy frameworks that impose penalties for non-compliance.

# Conclusion

While there have been some improvements in gender equality and the level of women's participation in Asia, the region still suffers from significant inequalities and lags behind other regions of the world in closing the gender gap. Women's political participation is not only an asset, but is also necessary in addressing the many complex issues in today's world, particularly political issues, as women comprise more than half of the world's population. Breaking down barriers women face in the political process is challenging, as a number of the participants at the Consultation can attest, but perhaps an even more difficult task is changing traditional mindsets and long held cultural beliefs that continue to impede women's rights around the globe.



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## Community of Democracies

The Community of Democracies is an intergovernmental organization that drives the global democratic agenda through common action. Since its establishment in 2000, the Community has brought the world's democracies together to advance and promote the democratic principles and standards enshrined in the Warsaw Declaration Toward a Community of Democracies that was signed by 106 countries.

Building on the Warsaw Declaration, the Community's founding document that 106 countries signed in 2000, the Community of Democracies seeks to support democratic transition and consolidation worldwide by:

- Assisting societies in the development and strengthening of democratic institutions and values;
- Identifying, alerting and responding, consistent with the UN Charter and the Warsaw Declaration to threats to democracy so as to assist states to remain on the path to democracy;
- Supporting and defending civil society in all countries;
- Advancing broad-based participation in democratic governance;
- Giving a voice to those working peacefully for democracy in all countries.





## The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD)

Since its inception in 1995, International IDEA has made significant contributions to the body of available knowledge and applicable policy options for promoting democratic participation and representation of women in decision-making processes. Through its global and regional programmes, IDEA supports political reform processes, awareness raising and capacity building on institutionalizing gender equality and women's empowerment in electoral and constitution-building processes, and within political parties. The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) was launched in April 2011 by seven Regional Organizations and International IDEA at the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS). Its primary objective is to offer and facilitate a platform for regional organizations to exchange as peers' knowledge and experiences in the application of democratic principles.

To date, eight regional organizations are participating in the IRDD and these include the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU), the League of Arab States (LAS), the OAS, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). International IDEA acts as the facilitator of the IRDD and functions as its dedicated secretariat through the Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre.



## United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

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UNDP works in nearly 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. We help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results. UNDP is working to strengthen new frameworks for development through integrated approach to supporting inclusive political processes in supporting and strengthening the capacities of political processes and institutions in order to improve citizen participation, voice and accountability. The advancement of women's equal participation and decision-making in political processes and institutions is one of the key priorities for UNDP across a variety of development contexts including stable, conflict/post conflict and transitional settings.



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## Contact Us

Al. Ujazdowskie 41

00-540 Warsaw, Poland

Tel. +48 22 375 90 00

Fax. +48 22 319 56 28

E-mail: [info@community-democracies.org](mailto:info@community-democracies.org)

Website: [community-democracies.org](http://community-democracies.org)

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