

Women's political leadership in the ASEAN region

Research report



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The research project is led by a multidisciplinary team of international experts on Southeast Asia. It draws on specialist expertise on gender, politics, and political participation as well as country specialists in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The team is led by Dr Aim Sinpeng from the University of Sydney and Dr Amalinda Savirani from Universitas Gadjah Mada.

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Disclaimer

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Executive summary

This report extends the work of Westminster Foundation for Democracy in advancing women's political participation and leadership. It fills the knowledge gap outlined in WFD's previous research about the need to enhance our understanding of the barriers to women's political leadership in non-Western contexts by producing new knowledge and drawing on non-English language research about women political leaders. We take on this challenge of both deepening and widening existing research of women's political leadership by focusing on one of the most dynamic and diverse regions in the world – Southeast Asia. We take a broad view on the notion of “political leadership” that includes both leadership in the formal political arena and the everyday form of political leadership at the grassroots level. In seeking to capture the change and continuity in how women become political leaders, we look to both history and the present to give us a holistic understanding of woman's lived experiences and trajectories of their political leadership journeys.

Research purpose

This research report sought to understand what barriers women face in their pursuit of political leadership. We consider what structural, institutional, economic, and cultural factors hinder or stop women from fully participating in political participation, leadership and governance. We focus on the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with in-depth case studies of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand – where WFD has teams and strategic priorities. We seek to profile women who have broken through these barriers or have forged and democratised pathways to political power. We pay special attention to women political leaders who have experienced violence – both visible and hidden – in their pursuit of change.

This report outlines many opportunities and challenges women in the ASEAN region face in their path to political leadership. It also outlines what forms of violence against women are present and how women leaders experience them. We also test several theoretical assumptions about the relationship between various dimensions of gender equality and democracy to better understand if the realities in the ASEAN region are aligned with such assumptions.

Wherever possible we draw on knowledge from non-English and indigenous sources to promote and advance scholarship on Southeast Asia by researchers from the region.

We hope these research findings, which are based on learnings from current and emerging actions, will influence and inform the actions of governments and civil society organisations as well as inform the strategic direction of WFD in its efforts to support and catalyse women's political leadership. The research is also intended to support advocates in their ongoing work for gender equality and political inclusion in Southeast Asia.



Research questions

Four areas of questions guide our research endeavours:

- What barriers to political leadership do women in Southeast Asia face? What paths to political leadership have the fewest hurdles? What paths to political leadership have the most obstacles?
- Why do some women face fewer barriers than others in pursuing political leadership?
- What does violence against women in politics look like in Southeast Asia? Do some women leaders face more violence than others? If so, why?
- What can better enable and support women in the future to advance political leadership?

Research methodology

This research adopts a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis of primary and secondary data on barriers to women's political leadership and participation in the ASEAN region. The data collection and analysis are divided into four parts:

- desk research of existing literature
- statistical and descriptive analysis of quantitative data
- interviews with women political leaders
- social media analysis

Key findings

1. Despite overall progress towards gender equity in the ASEAN region, gender equity in political leadership still lags. While more people believe women should have equal access to political power than before, men are still viewed as better political leaders than women in most cases.

2. The number of women in political leadership positions, both in local governments and national parliaments, has not continuously increased in the ASEAN region. All countries experienced either a drop or a flatlining in the number of women in top political positions in formal institutions. This suggests that achieving gender equity in political leadership is not a straightforward process: it can both stall and regress.

3. Most women political leaders face barriers to leadership. The top three barriers are: lack of financial resources, sexism and state repression. These constitute structural and cultural obstacles to women's trajectory towards political leadership in the ASEAN region. Women political leaders who reported no barriers to leadership are either drawn from political families, have strong connections to political parties, or are political trailblazers.

4. Autocracies perform better in getting more women into leadership positions particularly in getting women elected in national parliaments than more democratic states in ASEAN. Autocratic regimes are not antithetical to gender equality in politics when it comes to promoting more women to leadership positions. More research is needed, however, to better understand the extent to which women political leaders can get elected in the parliament in autocratic states and can perform well playing their function as a representative within this autocratic context in which general civil and political rights are limited in these countries.

5. Democracy appears to reduce propensity for women political leaders to experience violence – both physical and online. Women political leaders in countries with low levels of democracy experience much higher instances of state repression, intimidation, persecution, and online harassment – all forms of violence against women politicians (VAWP).

6. Structural issues represent the most enduring barriers to improving women's political leadership. The more religious a voter is, the less likely they are to support women in political leadership, especially among Muslim populations. Other key structural barriers that impede support for women political leaders are income levels and educational status. Having low levels of education and income is also a strong predictor for opposition to female political leadership.

7. We divide political leadership into two main spheres: leadership in formal politics and grassroots political leadership (informal politics). Women in grassroots leadership face more barriers in accessing power and leadership positions than women who pursue leadership in the formal political arena. Once in power, grassroots political leaders also face more barriers to exerting influence and affecting change.

8. There are three broad profiles of women political leaders identified in the ASEAN region: the networker, the trailblazer, and the activist. Women from elite backgrounds who pursue leadership in formal politics are most likely to network their way through power, by leveraging their family, business, and political party networks to give them access to leadership positions. Grassroots political leaders are most likely to be trailblazers: they create new paths to political leadership for others to follow. Some women leaders have taken all three paths.

9. Women political leaders who come from challenging financial backgrounds tend to have more caring responsibilities, thus increased barriers to pursuing and maintaining leadership. This suggests the enduring impacts of gendered socioeconomic inequalities on women's political advancement.

10. Affirmative action policies work no matter how improperly they are applied.

They increase women's representation in politics in both the formal political and grassroots arenas and promote more gender-sensitive organisational environment.

11. Institutions that are the biggest barriers to women's political leadership are political parties and security agencies. Political parties are gatekeepers of access to political leadership positions in formal politics: they deter and enable women into positions of power. Security apparatus of the state exercise repression against women political leaders in both formal and grassroots politics. Their presence creates a climate of fear and intimidation. They sometimes employ violence against women leaders.

12. 50% of women leaders interviewed focus on women issues when campaigning for leadership position and during their tenure. Politicians are less likely than grassroots leaders to emphasise women-focused issues, especially constituency MPs. Some women politicians strongly oppose affirmative action initiatives as they view them as antagonistic to women's empowerment.

13. Women leaders who are active on social media experience greater instances of online violence and harassment. The most common form of online violence is hate speech. The most frequent form of hate speech directed at female political leaders is religion-based, especially gendered Islamophobia.

14. Young, activist, social media active women leaders in grassroots politics are the most vulnerable to both state and online violence. Usually women leaders in this field deal with criticism as they are involved in advocacy on politically sensitive issues, positioning them as visible targets of political regimes and their supporters (cyber-mercenaries).

Taken together, our research suggests that there are divergent pathways for women to participate in and become political leaders. While each individual leaders' experience is unique, there are broad commonalities shared among them. Some of the most enduring barriers to women's political participation, such as cultural norms and economic inequalities, are entrenched and slow to change. At the same time, efforts to increase women's political participation at the leadership level, such as gender quotas, no matter how improperly applied, do work. Women leaders look for and appreciate the support of other female role models and mentors in building their confidence. Technology can, under the right circumstances, enable women to extend their influence and strengthen their leadership profile. But it also opens the door to more potential violence and harm. Overall, there are more women leaders in the ASEAN region today than they were two decades ago. Their diverse journeys towards leadership reflect the nuanced and complex pathways to becoming today's political leaders.

Key actions for civil society

- Promote gender sensitive practices in political parties, parliaments, and civil society organisations.
- Encourage more political parties to adopt voluntary electoral quotas by outlining the benefits of adopting such policies.
- Encourage women-to-women peer support and mentorship networks.
- Engage with young people to raise awareness on gender equality, democracy, and human rights.
- Provide social media training to women leaders, including how to detect, manage, and report online harm and violence.

Limitations of the research

This research has several limitations, given its short time frame and a small sample size. We see our research as providing an important empirical groundwork to probe existing assumptions and theoretical frameworks around women's political participation and inclusion. We also want to reflect the lived experiences of women political leaders from Southeast Asia, whose voices are underrepresented in English-language research.

More research is needed in the following areas:

- Why some autocratic states have more representation of women than in democracies.
- The relationship between women's political leadership and advocacy on women issues – the relationship is tenuous in the case of women leaders in the ASEAN region.
- Motivators for women with grassroots leadership experiences to enter politics, especially national politics.
- Why some women hesitate to support other women to pursue political leadership and how to improve women voters' awareness on women candidates with higher chance to support policies on women issues.
- Why some young people in some countries have started to oppose gender equity.

Conclusion

This research report highlights the importance of understanding the local contexts in which women political leaders emerge. While their decision to embark on political leadership is a choice, their choices are shaped by the economic, cultural, social, and political contexts they are embedded in. While all women leaders are motivated to be agents of change, how they pursue political change varies. Our findings point to key areas of action that may help to enable women who have decided to join politics to become political leaders and remain active in their leadership careers.

Regional context

Significant progress has been made towards gender equity in Southeast Asia. At 330 million strong, more Southeast Asian women today than ever before are educated: they are completing their primary and secondary education at nearly the same rates as their male counterparts, and their enrolment in tertiary education is rising. Substantial strides have also been made to reduce gender inequalities in the areas of child marriage, maternal mortality, access to education, and participation in decision-making.¹ Yet, other important dimensions in gender disparities, such as labour force participation and employment in high skilled sectors remain stagnant or in some cases widen.² Large numbers of highly educated women remain unemployed – a figure likely to rise as women in the ASEAN region experience a 30% increase in caring and domestic responsibilities as a result of the global pandemic.³

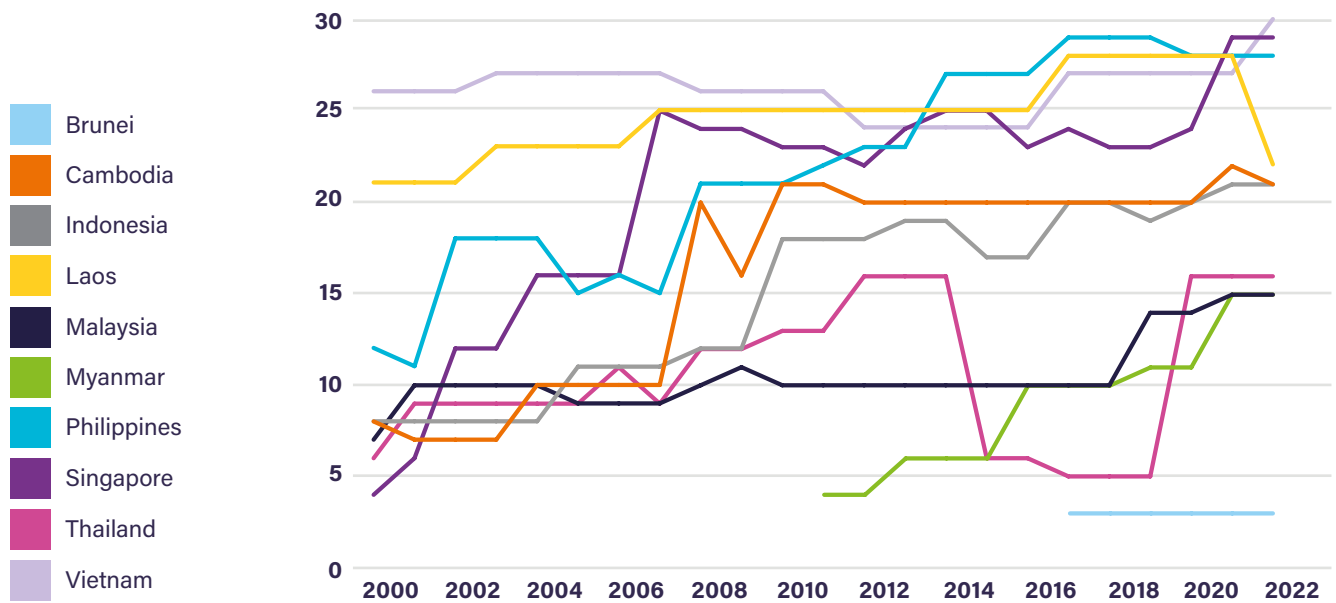
Political participation and leadership are areas in which the gender gap has both narrowed and widened across the ASEAN region in the past 20 years (Figure 1). Indonesia had only 8% of its seats in their national parliament occupied by women in 2000. By 2022, the figure increased to 21%. By contrast, Thailand's share of women-held seats in the national parliament in 2000 was 6%. It rose to 16% in 2012 then dropped back down to 5% in 2019 and has recently gone back up to 16% in 2022.

Like many indicators of development, the extent to which women participate in politics and attain political leadership depends on a range of formal and informal rules, institutions, and other structural factors combined in unique ways. By making up only between 15 to 20% of parliament seats in the three countries, women continue to face constraints on their aspirations to become political leaders.

Southeast Asia is home to both high-achieving countries and those that are lagging when it comes to gender equity. According to the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Report, the Philippines outperforms many Western nations – like Australia, the USA, and Switzerland – in closing the gender gap in education, economic participation, political empowerment, and health outcomes.⁴ By contrast, Myanmar is ranked in the bottom 25th quartile of countries in terms of gender equity.

Across the ASEAN region and globally, political empowerment is an area that faces the toughest challenge when it comes to closing the gender gap. Most studies of women in political leadership only examine women in high positions of power in the formal political arena: women in parliament, female ministers, and heads of states. We seek to go beyond narrowly measuring the number of women in top political jobs by widening our conception of political leadership as well as our understanding of women's varied pathways to political leadership.

Figure 1: Percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments. Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union



Why is it important to focus on advancing women’s political leadership now in the ASEAN region when there are so many competing priorities? Gender disparities in any form are bad for growth, development, and poverty reduction. Women’s equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving sustainable development, democracy, and a more just society. In a world concerned with economic recovery from the global health pandemic, ensuring that women have equal chance at leading political change could not be more important.

Existing research shows that women political leaders are more likely to champion inclusive policies that benefit the entire population (Carroll 2002). Women political leaders are also more likely to pursue education, social welfare, child and family, and public health policies as well as promoting improvement in the status of women (Wittmer and Bouche 2013). Beyond these potential instrumental benefits of having women political leaders, promoting equal women’s political leadership participation is about ensuring a more just, equal, democratic, and human rights-centric world. Having prolonged and continuous exposure to women’s leadership can alter norms and informal rules. These rules have long underpinned traditional gender norms and values that produce gender inequality in the first place.⁵

Although reliable statistics relating to the number of women who experience violence is difficult to come by, we know that Southeast Asia has some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence against women in the world. According to the recent estimates by the World Health Organization, 33% of Southeast Asian women suffer from domestic violence perpetrated by their intimate partners compared to the global average of 27%.⁶ This is likely an underestimate as entrenched social norms may deter many women from reporting abuse.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the prevalence of domestic violence in the region, with helpline call volumes having increased by 33% and 40% in Singapore and Malaysia, respectively.⁸ Many women never go into politics or take up political leadership because of their fear of violence.⁹

To transform our society towards a more gender equal one, we must look at political leadership beyond formal and institutional positions in national and local parliaments. In broadening our focus on women's political leadership to encompass various forms of leadership outside formal political institutions, we dovetail with WFD's emphasis on viewing grassroots activism as a crucial asset for future politicians (Cowper-Cowles, 2021). We go a step further by arguing that there are many forms of women's leadership and that women leaders of civil society organisations and community groups are also political leaders because their work can influence political change. Their visibility also expands what is considered acceptable political activity by women.

We also want to prompt a rethinking on the term "overcoming barriers" for women leaders in Southeast Asia. Our study has shown that many women access political leadership by charting their own path. These trailblazers effectively remove barriers to political leadership by starting their own organisations, be they a new political party or an advocacy group. By doing so, they lead from the ground up, often under challenging circumstances and with little political and economic capital. These self-made leaders are ingenious, enterprising, and creative. Their paths to political leadership should serve as models for future women political leaders.

Key concepts

This research focuses on identifying factors that enable and obstruct women from actualising their political leadership in the ASEAN region. Below are the key concepts we discuss in this report.

Political leadership

Political leaders are individuals who lead political change. Traditionally, most organisations and research institutions, consider only women with positions in formal politics as women political leaders. We take a wider view on the concept of political leaders to include all individuals who lead political and policy change by directing the actions of others. Their power is derived from their "office, personal influence, persuasive capacity, charisma, and coercion."¹⁰ Political leaders are "individuals who have positions in formal political institutions, such as members of parliament and leaders of the women's wing, everyday form of political parties, and everyday political leaders who are drawn from civil society." Political leaders do not have to possess formal positions – their power is a consequence of their leadership that can induce behavioural change in others. Therefore, a "leader" of a group opposing a development project is a leader not because she has been selected. Rather, she is the leader because others have inferred authority and legitimacy to her to lead. Leadership is therefore viewed as a symbiotic relationship between the leaders and those they lead.



Photo credit: Facebook

Amira Aisya Abd Aziz

The inclusion of women political leaders outside of formal political institutions and beyond democratic politics is crucial to capture the reality of political leadership in the ASEAN region. Many countries in the region are autocratic, which means that there are many political leaders in formal institutions who are not elected but wield significant power and authority to influence others; those who lead actions that can disrupt the status-quo and influence policy change. We also consider that grassroots civil society members are not often holders of official positions: their groups or organisations may not even be registered. Such realities do not take away the power and authority some women leaders have in affecting political change.

Grassroots political leadership

Grassroots leadership in politics refers to individuals whose activities are aimed at creating political change from the bottom-up. These leaders do not hold formal political office, but may work with formal political leaders to achieve change. We especially focus on women

leaders in the community and civil society organisations– whose activism and advocacy can influence policy change and political change, as they also initiate a political movement to support the advocacy and to influence existing political discourses. Grassroots political leaders may have some similarities with politicians – such as being university educated and having a strong knowledge capital – but they tend to not be wealthy, politically networked and do not come from political families.

Barriers to political leadership

We see barriers to political leadership as visible, hidden, and invisible, or using a term that Lukes (2005) suggests “one dimensional” (visible), “two dimensional” (hidden/covert/implicit) and “three dimensional” (hidden and subjective). Visible barriers to political leadership are ones that women leaders explicitly name as factors that hinder their trajectory towards and maintenance of their leadership. Hidden barriers are factors that are implicitly referred to as impediments to leadership, but women leaders tend to be impacted indirectly by them.

These factors may include the lack of a sexual harassment policy in the workplace or a lack of training programs for women leaders. They may not have been adversely affected by the lack of these policies, but they believe having them would help their journey to leadership. Invisible barriers are factors that women leaders may not be able to articulate as explicit roadblocks, but that their presence shapes the opportunities and challenges for women’s leadership. Invisible factors tend to be structural, like socioeconomic inequality. They create an unequal playing field by advantaging elite women when it comes to political leadership.

Pathways to political leadership

Studying how a diverse range of women achieve political leadership is about understanding their career progression and experiences, which can provide impactful insights to inspire others. Some women work their way up to leadership positions, while others take it upon themselves to lead. Some lead alone, while others lead collectively. Some women are asked to lead, while others have to fight their way to the top every step of the way. What explains these varied pathways to political leadership? We seek to gain broad perspectives as to what factors provide fertile grounds for women to emerge as leaders.

Recognising existing structural, institutional, cultural, and economic barriers to women’s political advancement, we seek to profile women who have broken through these barriers or have forged and democratised pathways to political power. Their political leadership is not only reflected in their ideas and actions, but also in the influence they bring to the public at large.

Violence against women in politics

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is a form of gender-based violence that includes any “act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realising their political rights and a range of human rights” (UN Women, 2021). These may include preventing women from running for political office, exercising their votes freely, being able to campaign freely, and/or enjoying freedom of speech and assembly. VAWP can be in public or private spheres and can be perpetrated by family members, members of the public, and the state.

Research design and methodology

Research aims

This project seeks to understand and learn from past, current, and emerging actions that facilitate women's political leadership in the ASEAN region. Findings from the research are intended to inform and influence the actions of international organisations, regional organisations, governments, civil society, and relevant corporations as well as informing strategic direction of Westminster Foundation for Democracy in its efforts to implement activities that would advance the political leadership of women in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. There are four key research aims for this project:

- To identify and analyse past and existing barriers to women's political leadership in the ASEAN region over time.
- To understand women's leadership profiles that represent key pathways to political leadership in the ASEAN region.
- To increase our understanding of violence against women in politics that incorporate visible, hidden, and invisible forms of violence and strategies to tackle them.
- To provide actionable research to inform WFD's strategy.

Research questions

To widen and deepen our understanding of women's political leadership in ASEAN and the kinds of barriers they face, we set out our research to ask the following questions:

- What barriers to political leadership do women in Southeast Asia face? Which paths to political leadership have the fewest hurdles? Which paths to political leadership present the most obstacles?
- Why do some women face fewer barriers than others in pursuing political leadership?
- What does violence against women in politics look like in Southeast Asia? Do some women leaders face more violence than others? If so, why?
- What can better enable and advance women's political leadership?

Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis of primary and secondary data on barriers to women's political leadership and participation in the ASEAN region. The data collection and analysis are divided into four parts:

- desk research of existing literature
- statistical and descriptive analysis of quantitative data
- interviews with women political leaders
- social media analysis

We conducted a thorough literature review of existing studies on women's political leadership in the ASEAN region to identify key challenges and opportunities. We then analysed ASEAN regional-level gender and political participation indicators drawing on a variety of global, regional, and country-specific databases on gender statistics. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 women political leaders from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Lastly, we identified narratives on social media that target women politicians in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to better understand what kind of issues and contexts give rise to such harassment. We also sought to identify effective strategies to counter abuse against women politicians.

Interview approach and recruitment

Our approach to interview recruitment is to maximise visible diversity: approaching women political leaders who appear, to the researchers, to be drawn from diverse demographic, socioeconomic, and other social backgrounds.

We target women who succeed to formal political leadership: elected representatives at all levels of governments. We also target women with grassroots political leadership: women who succeed in influencing policy change, broadly defined, in arenas beyond formal institutions. We leverage our own networks in each country and recruit interviewees using purposive, non-random sampling to maximise information-rich cases.

Ethical practice

The research received ethics approval through the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee. The research team employed the ISF Code of Ethical Research Conduct. We followed the ACFID Principles for Ethical Research and Evaluation which are: respect for human beings; beneficence; research merit and integrity; and justice. We also complied with advice from WFD regarding conducting trauma-informed interviews.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. Firstly, our interview cohort is non-randomised and not representative of the population. We relied on a combination of targeted and snowball sampling. Secondly, the interview data draws on personal experiences of women, and it may not be indicative of how it compares to the experiences of men in the same position. Thirdly, most of our interviews are conducted remotely which may introduce data bias.

Barriers to women's political leadership in the ASEAN region

Across the ASEAN region, women remain underrepresented in political life. Women are underrepresented in political office, as voters, and in political leadership positions. The marginalisation of women in the political sphere continues to occur despite incremental changes in the right direction. While it is acknowledged that more women than ever before are leaders in the political arena than in the past, the gains made in Southeast Asia have been viewed as incredibly slow. Our interview findings also confirm that 69% of women political leaders faced some form of barriers to leadership, while 31% reported having faced none. The discrepancies in the perceptions of women's barriers to leadership are indicative of the uneven and unequal experiences to leadership women in the ASEAN region face.

Existing literature on women's political advancement in Southeast Asia and globally points to three broad types of barriers that account for gender inequality in political leadership (Maguire 2018):

- structural and institutional barriers
- cultural barriers
- socioeconomic barriers

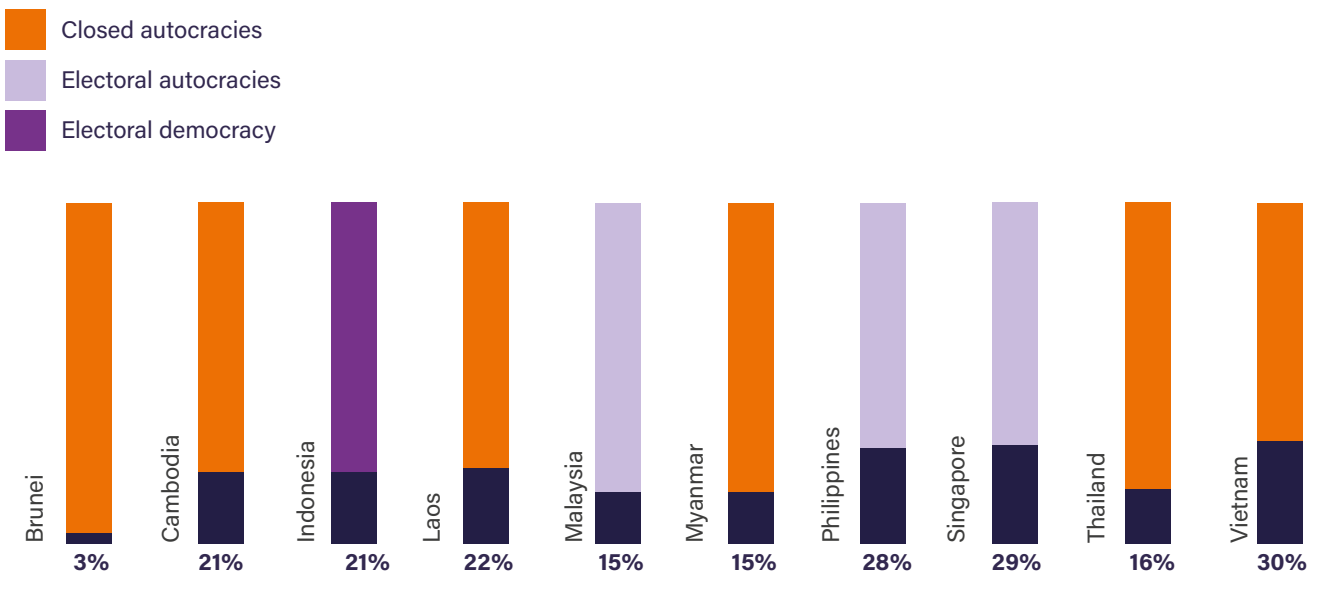
Structural and institutional barriers

Structural and institutional barriers contribute and shape the emergence and existence of political leaders, including women leaders. These barriers include issues relating to regulations that tend to support male leadership, and discriminatory laws constraining women (Tremblay, 2007). In addition, existing values in a patriarchal society enable male dominance in political leadership. Political systems are believed to have played key roles in deterring women from advancing political leadership (Shair-Rosenfield 2012). It is generally accepted that women's representation is better in democratic countries than in autocratic countries, as democracies tend to be more decentralised and inclusive in candidate selection procedures, reducing the opportunities for men to control who gets to run for office (Lee and Park, 2018).

Thailand's massive drop in the number of parliament seats held by women during its military dictatorship from 2014 to 2019 is a case in point (see Figure 1). The country went from having its first woman prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra and a relatively high number of women in parliamentary seats (16%), to all-male junta leaders of the National Council for Peace and Order and a drop in the number of seats in parliament held by women to 5%. Military dictatorships, by design, are particularly antithetical to women's political empowerment because they draw on the supply of political candidates from male dominated institutions of the armed forces.

Figure 2: Percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments, 2022.

Source: Authors' calculations.

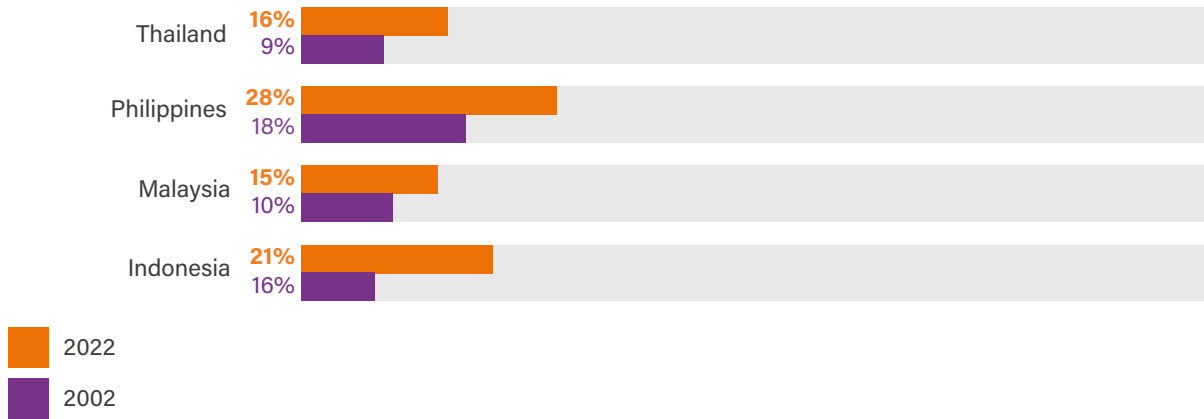


Women in closed autocracies and electoral autocracies in the ASEAN region are better at obtaining parliamentary seats than their peers from more democratic political systems (Luhmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg 2018). In Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, the percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments in 2022 were 30%, 22%, 15%, and 16% respectively (Figure 2). Singapore, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, have 29%, 21%, 28% and 15% shares of parliament seats occupied by women respectively. The only country classified as a democracy – Indonesia – sees 21% of seats in parliament go to women politicians. These findings are perplexing given that the best performing countries in terms of percentage seat shares held by women are not at all democratic.

What explains the high number of women in political power in one-party states like Vietnam? First, Vietnam has a gender quota, setting a voluntary target of 30% women's representation in the country's National Assembly (NA) (Bui 2010). Joshi and Timothy (2018) argue that the Vietnamese Communist Party's adoptions of gender quota, first in 1967 and again in 1994, were not mere window-dressing; they were strategies of autocratic adaptation whereby groups in society (in this case, women) were initially symbolically co-opted to increase the regime's legitimacy but then later integrated as women leaders in the NA grew in number and influence. Additionally, the fact that Vietnam's electoral system allows for multiple candidates to be elected in each electoral unit opens up more opportunities for women candidates to participate, negating the potential impact of the majority voting systems being particularly bad in getting women elected.

Figure 3: Percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments in the pre- and post- quota years, comparing 2002 and 2022.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary-Union. Note: in the Philippines, the gender quota was established in 1991



The case of Vietnam highlights two other important institutional factors that drive women's political leadership in the formal political arena: candidate selection process and quotas. Political parties are gate keepers to women's political leadership; they decide which candidates to select, what order they should be ranked, and what constituencies they should compete in. The vast literature on political recruitment suggests that the underrepresentation of women in political office is partly a direct result of political parties' preference for male candidates (Tadros 2014). Parties choose more men to run for elections than women for a variety of reasons, such as women being less likely to self-nominate and women not being seen as viable candidates or fitting with the party image (Dahlerup 2018). The odds are further stacked against women in single-member-district, first-past-the-post systems where chances of women's electoral success are considerably lower when compared to proportional representation systems (Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

The most important institutional invention that has increased the number of women political leaders globally is the gender quota. Gender quotas are a form of affirmative action designed to increase the number of women running for political office. It follows the theory that it is important to create a critical mass of women in positions of power to engender change.¹⁰ In Southeast Asia, the implementation of electoral quotas for women successfully increased women's representation at the national level. Figure 3 shows that shares of parliamentary seats occupied by women increased between 5% and 13% when comparing the pre- and post- quota period. At the local level, there seems to be some positive impact on the number of women in local governments as well, although the causal link between gender quotas at the national level and their effects on the local elections is under researched. It appears that there are as many women represented in local governments as in national parliaments in most countries in the ASEAN region (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of seats held by women in local governments

Source: Inter-Parliamentary-Union

Country	Year	Local government	National parliaments
Cambodia	2020	17%	20%
Indonesia	2021	16%	21%
Laos	2018	32%	28%
Philippines	2019	29%	29%
Thailand	2021	18%	16%
Vietnam	2022	29%	30%

Affirmative action policies implemented in civic organisations also empower grassroots women leaders. Two women leaders from Indonesian NGOs obtained their positions from organisations that were dominated by women in senior positions. These organisations not only promoted and recruited women leaders, but also have gender-sensitive workplace policies in place, such as parental leave for both women and men workers.

Socioeconomic barriers

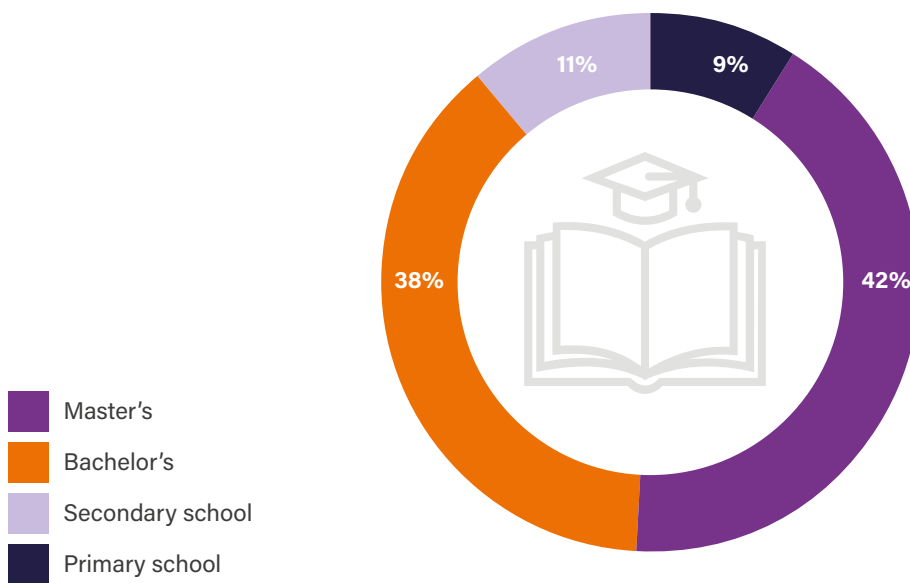
Money politics, patronage, and clientelism are pervasive and entrenched in Southeast Asia and they contribute negatively to women's political participation and leadership (Hicken, Aspinall and Weiss 2019). The problem with money politics, which is the extensive use of money to buy votes and influence, is that it significantly raises the costs of running for political office and gives undue advantage to the inner circles of local party machines that tend to be dominated by men. Our interview findings demonstrate that financial barriers constitute the biggest impediments to political leadership for women. As Aspinall, White and

Savirani note (2021), to be winners at the ballot, women candidates need to run expensive campaigns on the ground and mobilise all their social networks – both require an extensive use of material resources, of which women have fewer when compared to men.

The outsize importance of material wealth and political connections needed to pursue political leadership in the formal arena has meant that elite women of a higher socioeconomic status and especially those drawn from political families have a significant advantage over other women candidates (Jalalzai 2004). Women in the ASEAN region with elite backgrounds – those who are university educated, had financially comfortable upbringings, and do not have significant caring responsibilities – faced fewer barriers to leadership. Out of the 45 women interviewed, 56% are elite women with the majority being politicians. 20% of women political leaders grew up relatively poor, did not attend university and have significant caring responsibilities. Most of these “non-elite” women found leadership outside formal politics.

Figure 4: Highest educational attainment of women leaders interviewed.

Source: Authors' calculations



Political families are a dominant and established feature of politics in the ASEAN region, especially in Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Purdey 2016) but belonging to one does not always guarantee electoral success. In the Philippines, where political leadership presents as a revolving door of influential families, candidates regardless of gender who have a relative in a political office are 5 times more likely to win their first elections (Querubin 2016). Institutional engineering measures, such as term limits, created to ensure greater chance of political change has in fact led to a large increase of female relatives of term-limited incumbents entering local politics (Labonne, Parsa and Querubin 2021). Dynasties flourish in political systems that have weak institutions or rampant factionalism as they serve to provide a source of political stability (Thompson 2012).

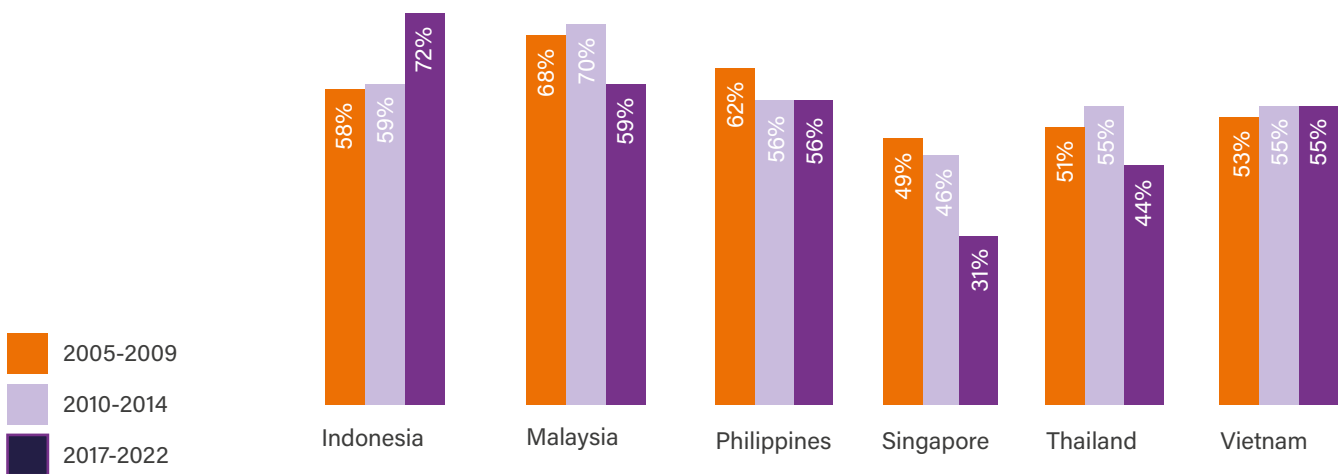
We find evidence in our country case studies that elite women from political families face fewer barriers to pursuing power in formal institutions as well as in grassroots leadership. In both Thailand and Indonesia, women politicians interviewed were wealthier and more educated than grassroots political leaders.

In the case of Malaysia, more women from the elite background are wealthier but they have lower level of education compared to in Indonesia and Thailand. Elite women who have political connections and networks, despite their lack of experience, face even fewer obstacles. The network helps them to navigate the electoral contestation, and helps them to win seats where money politics, patronage, and networks matter more than policy platforms.

Not all elite women succeed in gaining political leadership. But we also find that not all women from political dynasties succeed at the ballot – their performance is the strongest when running in their families' constituencies. The importance of being from a political family does not mean, however, that other personal assets are not crucial. Beyond wealth, women political leaders who develop political capital through frequent and intense engagement with various political activities for others (such as campaigning, fundraising, networking, and speech writing) gain invaluable experiences and networks that become indispensable when they pursue political office themselves.

Figure 5: Preference for male political leaders over time (2005 – 2022)

Source: World Value Survey, 2005-2022



Cultural barriers

Cultural norms and religious beliefs against women’s political leadership have been shown to be the hardest to change and difficult to tackle. In Southeast Asia, while public perception towards certain dimensions of gender equality such as equal education access and job access are no longer an issue (World Value Survey 2018), public acceptance of women political leaders remains problematic.

Yet, when examining only the issue of gender and political leadership, most places in the ASEAN region have a strong preference for male leadership. Figure 5 draws on results from three waves of the World Value Survey spanning 2005 to 2022 in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam to the question: “Are men better as political leaders than women?” Singapore is the only country where public support for women political leaders improved over time, with the biggest increase occurring in the last 5 years.

Four countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam – still see more than 50% of respondents preferring men as political leaders than women. In Indonesia, there is a sharp rise in the preference for male political leaders, having increased 14% between 2006 and 2018. Malaysia and Thailand also witnessed a decline in support for women political leaders between 2006 and 2012, before the situation improved in 2018. These findings show clearly that with the exception of Singapore, public acceptance of women political leaders remain weak.

Examining in greater depth the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of opponents to gender equity in political leadership in the ASEAN region, we find that religiosity represents the strongest barrier to women in politics. In all six countries, those who view religion as an important part of their lives are also more likely to oppose women in political leadership positions. For example, according to some culturally specific interpretations of Islamic belief, men should be leaders in all arenas including in a private and in public spheres. In these cases, women are not allowed to lead a prayer if men are present. These insights do not, however, take away from the fact that many women progress to political leadership through religious networks. Islamic groups have been found to provide crucial support for supporting women candidates in elections (Prihatini 2020). Moreover, Christian networks have been pivotal to the rise of minority women politicians in Malaysia (Weiss 2012). The relationship between religiosity and support for women political leaders are both nuanced and complex.

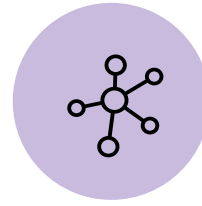
In sum, public attitudes towards women's role in formal politics wax and wane across the region. Some states have seen progress towards public support for gender equity in politics, while other states have seen a reduction in support over time. It is unclear whether having more women in political leadership indeed changes the perception of who controls political power. Countries with gender quotas such as Indonesia and the Philippines are seeing greater acceptance of male dominance in politics, whereas other non-gender quota countries like Laos and Myanmar are seeing the reversed trend. If changing cultural barriers to gender equity partially depends on the number of 'role models' in society then countries of the ASEAN region have an uphill battle ahead.

Pathways to political leadership

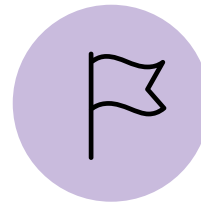
Based on our interview data of 45 women political leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, we construct three key profiles of pathways to women's political leadership. They are:

- **the networker model**
- **the trailblazer model**
- **the activist model**

These models are arrived at deductively, based on personal experiences of interviewed politicians and grassroots political leaders. We also supplement these interviews with our understanding of each woman leader's positionality to reflect how differences in social position and power shape identities and access to political power. These pathways are ideal types and do not fully capture all women leaders that belong to each pathway. We bring these models to life by inserting anonymised data based on our interview materials to demonstrate the nuances within each pathway.



The networker pathway is one in which personal and professional networks are key assets for political leadership. Network ties to institutions, families or groups, are the key driving force that paves the way for leadership. A networker primarily relies on her network to break through barriers towards political leadership.



The trailblazer pathway is one marked by political entrepreneurship. This pathway model applies to women who chart their own journey to leadership by founding a new political party, organisation, or group to advocate for political change. They do not wait for anyone to open doors for them, thus removing entry barriers to leadership.



The activist pathway is exemplified by a sustained effort to advocate for political change. Women who take this path tend to stay on it for quite a long time, often working their way from the bottom to the top. They often have to prove their leadership qualities through their activism over an extended period of time before pursuing leadership roles.

Some women political leaders take combined pathways to leadership. They may start out as an activist, before trailblazing their way to leadership by founding a new organisation. They may subsequently pursue formal politics, leveraging networks gained over the years as an activist and head of a civic organisation. For the women leaders with diverse pathway experiences, their trajectories reflect the complimentary nature of these pathway models.

Recognising that not all political leaders take the exact same road to leadership, our emphasis is on outlining similarities and differences in each journey to provide insightful and practical advice to researchers and practitioners seeking to develop programmes that can help remove barriers in each pathway model. Women leaders on these three pathways, who fit within these profiles differ in their perspectives on: how they pursue political power, how they decide to become a member of parliament or a leader in a grassroots organisation; what they see as barriers to leadership and how they seek to breakthrough these barriers.

There are different degrees to which women leaders interviewed in this study meet the pathway types. We capture the variations in how women leaders fit into each pathway by dividing up the pathways by their length. The length of pathways is shaped by a woman's positionality in society and the political context from which she emerges.

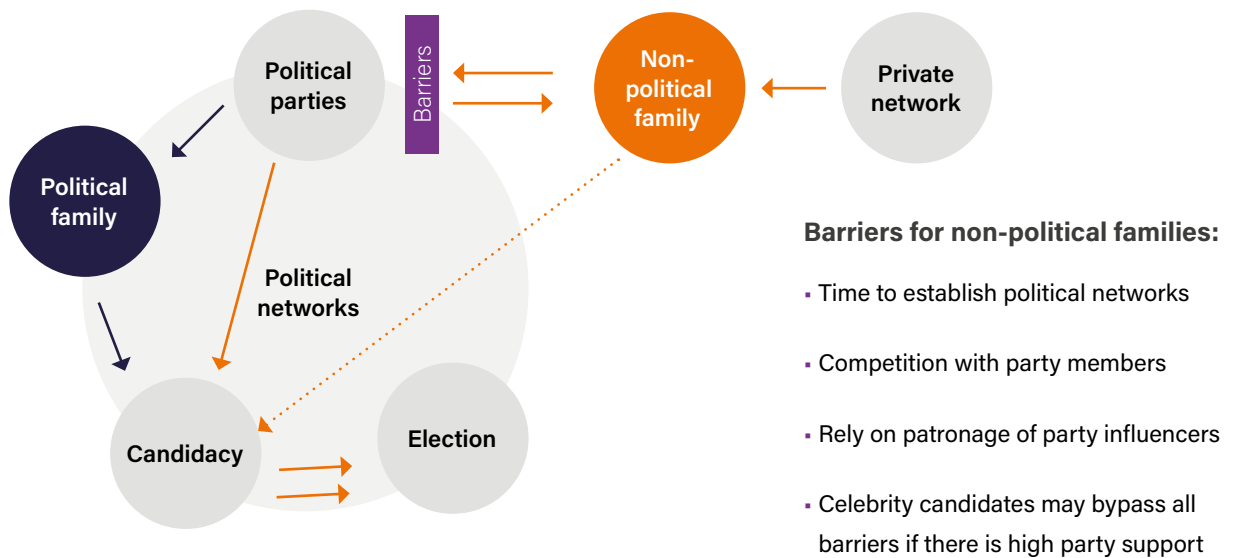
A short pathway refers to a pathway with the least resistance. This pathway tends to characterise women whose positionality maximises her chance to succeed in political leadership. This could mean that she comes from an elite background, does not consider herself as a minority, is financially well-off, and has minimal caring responsibilities. In our interviews we find that women who have the shortest pathway to leadership are elite women who are not identified as minority, financially secure and have minimal caring responsibilities.

A medium-length pathway refers to a pathway with moderate resistance. This pathway characterises a route that has a number of obstacles, but they can be surmountable given some time. Women leaders who have taken a medium-length leadership pathway have certain resources or aspects of their positionality that are helpful towards pursuing leadership, but they also have some drawbacks that work against them. For example, an elite woman who is a religious minority with business networks and financial resources may want to join a political party to run for office, but she lacks political networks. Her networker path to political leadership would take longer compared to a leader who comes from a political family.

A long pathway refers to a pathway with the most resistance. Women who gain leadership roles in a long pathway tend to come from a position comprising several structural disadvantages: low socioeconomic status, paucity of financial resources, limited access to political, social, and business networks, and being a member of a minority who experiences multiple forms of discrimination. Women on these paths take the longest time to get to political leadership, partly because no one opens doors for them – they have to work their way up on their own. The length of the path is also partly explained by a lack of self-esteem and confidence as they often face criticism and prejudice from others that deter them from pursuing leadership.

Figure 6: The networker's entry to political leadership

Source: Authors



One of the goals of this research is to find practical ways to shorten pathways to leadership, regardless of which pathways aspiring women leaders embark on. We provide some key recommendations based on the lived experiences of women leaders we interviewed of how they have been able to shortcut their pathways to leadership.

We find that institutional interventions that increase incentives for political parties to promote women's leadership is the most effective measure to shortcut women's journey to political leadership. For leadership in the grassroots, networking opportunities with highly networked individuals (network sharing) could open new channels for change.

The Networker

The greatest assets for women who seek to pursue political leadership are their family, political, and business networks. Networks are sources of political, social, and financial capital that aspiring women leaders draw on to increase their credibility, build their brand, and enhance public trust. The advantage of networked women is that their networks reduce the costs of entering politics. Networkers tend to have high financial capital, especially if they are drawn from business networks, which can help overcome the financial costs of being in politics. However, there is a high social expectation for networkers to be 'married to their networks' – attending all sorts of social events such as weddings and funerals. If they are networkers in politically divided societies and their networks are perceived as politically partial, then it becomes difficult to attract votes from the undecided and from those on the opposite side of politics.

Women from political families enjoy the most direct and least challenging entry into political leadership among women. All women drawn from political families in our interview data reported no barriers to their becoming candidates and running for election. In most cases, political parties approach them first or they already belong to existing parties due to their family ties. Their established networks and family names are their greatest assets as candidates and successful politicians. Their key barriers tend to start once elected, as maintaining networks can be challenging,

especially within the brokerage system (to which they have limited access) as it operates through patronage. This system to maintain loyalty with voters/constituents, which is prominent in the three case study countries (Aspinall et al., 2022), is costly and time-consuming. Often the entire family is involved: parents, siblings, and relatives work hard to maintain their political primacy. In party systems known for party switching, their loyalty to specific political parties is tenuous, thus, political parties work hard to keep the loyalty of these political families.

Textbox 1

A networker's story

An excerpt from an interview with a member of parliament in Thailand

I embarked on a journey to political leadership in my teens. I went with my uncle (a local politician) to visit his constituents, talked to them, and saw all the struggles they faced. I saw a lot of inequalities everywhere. The difference in the living conditions of those in rural versus urban communities was huge.

When my uncle asked me to run for a mayor in a municipality in northern Thailand, he told me honestly that my family name would not give me preferential treatment among the party leadership. I would still have to work hard like any other candidate. I would have no free time. I accepted the challenge and won my first election with support from my family and party.

Looking back, my electoral successes were due to my uncle's established networks with the constituents. Many people in my constituencies liked him, respected him – he was well known. People expected me to carry on his legacy.

The policies of my political party also helped a lot – people believed in them. I also had no internal party competition. Initially there was going to be a male candidate who would run against me (in the primary) for the 2011 election. But the party switched him to a party-list candidate, so that I would not have to compete with him. I also relied on my family's financial resources to help cover campaigning costs. I am not married and have no caring responsibilities, so I am lucky to be able to devote all my time and resources to my job as an MP.

“The biggest barrier to my political leadership was violence from the state. After the 2014 coup and the passing of the new constitution, I was detained in solitary confinement by the soldiers. I lost a lot of weight and had to get treatment for the mental and emotional abuse I received in jail. After I was released, I experienced serious online harassment, some of which was sexual in nature.”

For networkers from non-political families, their assets tend to be their business networks. They may be celebrity or household names whose lack of political networks is compensated by their wealth or their celebrity status, both of which are valuable in attracting votes. Their relationship with political parties is indirect: they often do not belong to any political party initially and may approach parties in their pursuit of leadership. For very big household names, they may get recruited by political parties directly as a symbol of party's status enhancement. Their barriers really begin inside the party: whether they get to become candidates and run for election depends on factors such as support among senior party members and the level of competition with existing members (especially when running in constituency). They almost always have a party influencer championing their cause, which suggests the continued importance of the patronage system inside political parties.

The path to political leadership for networkers is not straightforward. As the case of the Thai MP (textbox 1) has shown, her path to political leadership should be short and smooth given her positionality and strong ties with a political party. She was from a well-established political family, who was running for a seat in her family's constituency. She had full support from her political party, who went out of their way to ensure she would face no internal competition. In this respect, she did not face barriers to entering politics, being nominated as a candidate in the desired constituency and winning election. The barriers to leadership she faced came afterwards. As an opposition MP, she paid a heavy personal and professional price during the military dictatorship in Thailand. She was unable to serve as an MP, was imprisoned, and suffered significant abuse.

Textbox 2

A networker from a non-political family

Okiviana "Oki" is a member of Sukoharjo Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), as well as member of local parliament in the same district. Always interested in politics, she became involved with the PKB when the party was recruiting female candidates for the 2019 election. Leveraging her father's networks and her family's financial resources, she successfully ran for election in Sukoharjo, central Java.

She credited her father's enthusiastic support for her to run for office as critical to her electoral victory. He helped mobilise his networks to campaign for her election.



Photo: Twitter

Oki also received support from her party, which was very much open to her candidacy. The gender quota helped to give her party incentives to recruit new female candidates such as her.

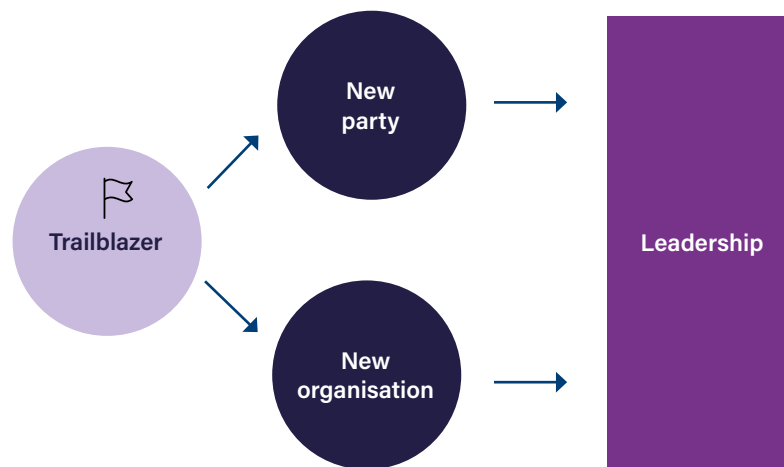
On the other hand, Okiviana's path to leadership was easier with fewer obstacles despite not coming from a political family. As a minority in Indonesia, she would typically have had a harder time getting nominated and winning the election. Yet two key factors helped her overcome these barriers: the party's shortage of women candidates to meet the quota requirement and her family's strong support for her candidacy. While Oki did not have existing ties with a political party prior to running for office, there was a demand for women candidates due to the gender quota requirement in Indonesia. As such, her party, the PKB was very open to new women candidates. Oki's father lent his support to help her win her first local election by tapping into his extensive social networks and leveraging his financial resources to help Oki get elected. She did face internal competition from another woman candidate – a by product of Indonesia's electoral system of open-list PR. Oki did not face any violence or online abuse as a candidate and politician. She is, however, planning to leave politics to start a family – something she did not envision doing while serving as an MP.

Grassroots political leaders who are networkers tend to be former politicians with existing ties to political parties or well-known members of the community. Their path to leadership is more challenging than elite women with strong existing political and business ties. For non-elite women with strong community networks, their main barriers would be to mobilise their networks to take on costly action, such as demonstrations, rallies, or other contentious activities that could invite repressive responses from the state or require financially costly or prolonged efforts to build momentum and make their advocacy known.

Positionality and existing political contexts shape the incentive structure and the likelihood of success when women seek political leadership. Family networks can act as critical resources for these women to aspire to and obtain political leadership. An institutional incentive to promote gender equity, like the quota, helps to break down barriers for political parties to recruit women who do not have ties to political leadership.

Figure 7: The trailblazer's entry to political leadership

Source: Authors



The Trailblazer

Forty percent of women leaders interviewed are trailblazers. They either founded new political parties, or civic / non-profit organisations, or advocacy groups – thereby circumventing the main institutional barrier to their leadership. They found that existing institutions, both in formal and informal political realms, did not offer them the right platform for their leadership aspirations. They are motivated both ideologically and strategically to establish new organisations or parties where they can go their own way. By becoming their own boss, they immediately become leaders of their own organisations and can set them up in ways that promote women issues.

Trailblazers are common among grassroots political leaders as the barriers for entry are low, especially for advocacy groups that are not officially registered as non-profit organisations. Trailblazers can set up an organisation as a group on Facebook and begin their advocacy online. Some have started their advocacy group on the ground, prompted by their direct experience with development projects that have

adversely affected their lives. These grassroots leaders had to set up a new group where there was none as a way to mobilise public support for an important cause, which may include both women's and non-women's issues. All grassroots leaders who founded new initiatives end up having to be active on social media eventually to raise awareness and gain more support over time.

Women who adopt the trailblazer pathway have diverse backgrounds and positionality. Contrary to popular belief, setting up a new organisation does not require significant financial resources or political networks to succeed. This is especially true for grassroots initiatives where organisations do not have to be formally set up for advocacy work to begin. As such, the trailblazer pathway to political leadership is one with the fewest obstacles in terms of "leadership entry". This pathway is also most suited for women who have few financial resources. For trailblazers, the barriers are not at the beginning stage, but rather at later stages once the organisation, group, or initiative has begun.

Textbox 3

A networker-trailblazer's story

An adapted excerpt from an interview with a former member of parliament and co-founder of a new political party in Thailand

As a young woman who has spent a long time outside of Thailand, my journey towards political leadership was quite unusual.

I completed a graduate law degree in the UK and worked abroad until I returned to Thailand in 2017. I was shocked at the political situation, and I wondered why more young Thais could not get involved in politics. I used to volunteer for a political party and was involved in their activities. I reached out to my networks with the party to start a conversation about setting up a new party.

I co-founded a new political party with some members of an established political party I had ties with, who decided to leave.

"I wanted to establish a new party that would align with my values: being open to new voices and promoting gender equality."

Initially I was just doing administrative work, for at least a year, and as I travelled with high-ranking party executives (well-known politicians), I was asked about becoming a candidate. Because I pushed through the gender equality policy within the party, we agreed that we would alternate between a male and female candidate. As a co-founder, I was placed at number 2 on the party-list and that was how I got elected as an MP.

I faced many barriers to political leadership. I was young and had limited political experiences. I did not have the financial resources to help with founding a new party and running as a candidate. I contributed to the party solely from my intellectual capacity and experiences. I also faced obstacles from several people inside the party who did not agree with the gender equity policy I pushed hard for or who did not understand how I got into the leadership role without contributing funds to the party. There were a lot of unpleasant and unkind comments made about me. Because I was new to politics, I had to prove myself a lot and worked very hard. I received both support and unfair treatment from other women in my party. "I think it's very sad how women would be scheming to bring you down."

As the case study of Zurianty Sudin (textbox 4) indicates, her modest background, significant caring responsibilities, limited time and financial resources, and a full-time job did not prevent her from starting a new charity. Given her positionality, her path to leadership was cut short by her choice of establishing a new organisation, rather than joining an existing one. The challenge for a trailblazer political leader is not the 'entry' aspect of leadership, but rather its maintenance – because that requires resources and human capital.

Women who found new political parties, do not do it alone, but rather with a group of like-minded leaders, some of whom have political and/or business connections. As setting up a new party is much more costly, women who adopt this path face more barriers to leadership as the option is more resource intensive. We found in our interviews that women leaders who are co-founders of new political parties have to partner with networkers – individuals with strong political and business networks – in order to successfully establish new parties.

Textbox 4

A trailblazer's story

Zurianty Sudin is a co-founder of Jejak Rimba, which provides early childhood education and empowerment for the Orang Asli, an indigenous population in Malaysia. Having grown up in urban poverty, she learned the value of charity from a young age and has always been involved in charitable work. Prior to founding Jejak Rimba, she headed a number of charity projects including the Free Patrol campaign and raising funds to help flood victims in Kelantan.

She established her organisation after visiting Orang Asli villages for 1.5 years. While she faced no barrier in setting up the organisation, she encountered many obstacles leading it.



Photo: Unreserved Media

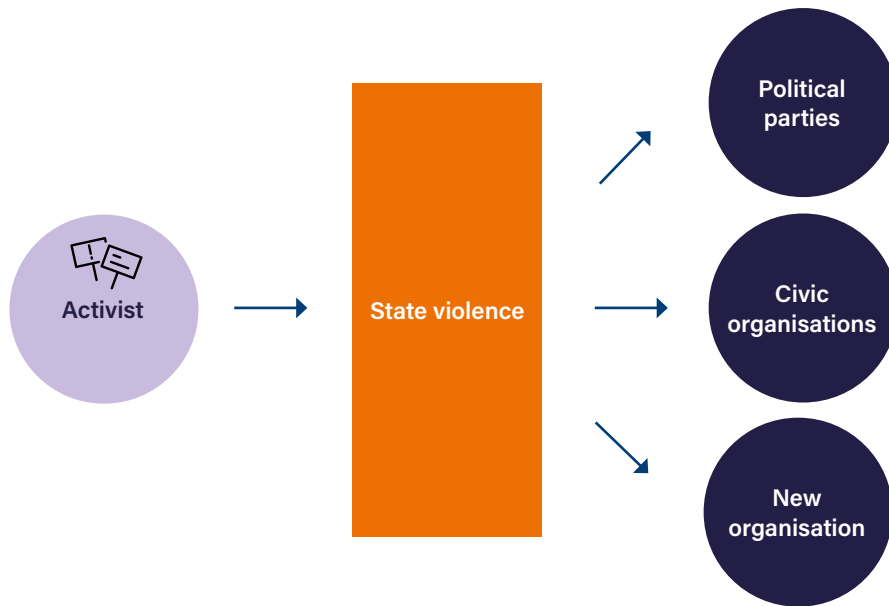
The biggest issue she faces is to recruit and maintain volunteers and committee members. The organisation is a charity and Zurianty has a significant caring responsibility, she has a full-time job as well as running Jejak Rimba. She does charity work to feed her soul and give purpose and meaning to her life.

There is one exception where a new political party is founded by mostly non-elites and grassroots activists without backing from influencers within the political and business arena. The party was successfully established with little resources, but the founders admitted having no hope of ever getting elected.

As the case of the former MP in Thailand indicated (textbox 3), her rise to leadership was catapulted by her decision to co-found a new political party. Unlike grassroots organisations, political parties are not easily established: they require significant financial resources, political networks and the support of existing and well-known politicians for them to be successful at the ballot box. This former MP took a networker-trailblazer pathway that was medium in length. Her decision to found a new party, as opposed to join an already established party potentially shortcut her path to leadership significantly. As she lacked financial resources, electoral and political networks, and experience

in politics, she would not have been considered as a potential candidate or be listed at the top of the candidate list if she had stayed with an established party. But her decision to set up a new party was contingent on her ability to get influential politicians to come on board. Without the political networks of existing politicians, it would have been very difficult for her to find electoral success. Being a party-list candidate also helps to reduce pressure for her to have to build new electoral and political networks.

Figure 8: The activist's entry to political leadership



The Activist

Women activists face the greatest barrier to becoming political leaders if they choose to join existing organisations. Because they often lack the political, business, and social capital to pursue political leadership, they have to work their way up to the top (unless the organisation has a gender quota policy). This is the path many grassroots women leaders take because of their background as activists in their early years, such as being student activists at university. They volunteer their time for a cause they care about and their hard work gets recognised by senior leadership of organisations, who then offer them an entry point to the organisation. They also often engage in costly activities that they need to take time off work or study to do and may face punitive punishments after (such as loss of jobs, getting kicked out of university, or jail).

Due to their largely ordinary backgrounds, activist women leaders may have to spend years proving themselves valuable to the organisation unless there is a gender quota internally that shortens the leadership route for these women. Those years spent proving themselves can be unpaid, which raises the cost of engagement. To obtain leadership roles, some women have had to take on additional studies, such as a university degree or diploma, which again increases costs, both in time and funds.

Some activists see their activism as a stepping stone to enter formal politics. Successful activists who crossover into formal politics and gain political leadership are women who have some connection to political parties and whose activism has been sufficiently high-profile that they are known. Their activism would gain sufficient followers and networks that political parties could see as valuable to list them as party candidates for elections. Thus, the quality of their activism matters: the more successful they are in their advocacy, the more likely they gain assets that can be valuable to political parties.

Textbox 5

An activist-trailblazer's story

Wanvipa Maison, MP, Move Forward Party, Thailand

A former factory worker from a humble background, Wanvipa became a labour activist fighting for the rights of garment workers to improve the working conditions of herself and her peers. Her labour advocacy got her involved with pro-democracy grassroots activist groups, that eventually evolved into a political party, Future Forward Party (FFP).

Having been an original founding member of the party, Wanvipa was listed as number 3 on the party-list candidacy for the 2019 general election. She was successfully elected as a member of parliament and



Photo: Facebook

reported facing no barrier to attaining this leadership role. Her extraordinary path to success can be credited to her political entrepreneurialism and audacity to challenge the status quo by helping to create a new political party.

Wanvipa Maison's activist path led directly to political leadership in a new political party that she helped co-found. Her journey to leadership was significantly accelerated due to her decision to join other like-minded individuals to set up the Future Forward Party. Her positionality in Thailand should have created the most barriers for her to pursue political leadership. She worked as a factory worker right up until she was elected, came from urban poverty, and is a single mother. Yet, her engagement with labour groups raised her profile among political activists who had planned to establish a new political party. Once the party was established, she was listed among the top party-list MP candidates.

Textbox 6

An activist's story

An adapted excerpt from an interview with former executive director of a youth environmental group in Indonesia.

I was always interested in environmental issues at a young age. When I was in high school I joined "Friends of WALHI", a well known environmental group in Indonesia. Through my volunteering roles and active involvement in "Friends of WALHI" I became more interested in the nexus between environmentalism and inequality.

Following the completion of my graduate study, I was approached by a youth environmental organisation to become an executive director. The organisation pursued a gender equality policy with women occupying all senior roles.

I found peer support and networking opportunities among leaders of environmental groups in Indonesia that were crucial to breaking down barriers to leadership. At a certain period of time, there were quite significant numbers of women leaders in many civil society organisations in Indonesia. They formed a support group, with mentoring from a senior activist. Through these meetings, training programs were getting created to further mentor and support women in leadership positions.

Summary of pathway findings

In summary, pathways to political leadership can be broadly categorised into three paths: the networker, the trailblazer, and the activist. Many women leaders we interviewed adopted a combined pathway to leadership, often unintentionally but purposefully. The most common combined paths are the activist-trailblazer pathway, which has been employed by women who began their leadership journey as activists who then crossed over into trailblazing new organisations. Activism was used as a platform to gain experience and hone entrepreneurial skills. Nearly all trailblazers were activists at a young age and either had volunteered or worked for other organisations before establishing their own. Some women leaders are "serial trailblazers" – they have extensive experience setting up new organisations before embarking on ones aimed at political change.

Positionality, the way society is structured and gendered, and political context drive different women to take divergent pathways to political

leadership. Their choices of pathways are informed by their backgrounds, incentives, and constraints and the degree of family support. The networker model is the most resource-intensive path to political leadership, as it relies on extensive political, social, and financial networks to achieve the goal. Women from non-elite background who do not have ties to political parties are the least likely to pursue this pathway because they lack the networks and resources needed to mobilise for change.

The most popular pathway to political leadership for women in the ASEAN region is the trailblazer pathway. This reflects the general overall improvement of women in all aspects of gendered development in the region. There are more highly educated, entrepreneurial women in the ASEAN region than ever who take it upon themselves to lead political change. This pathway is particularly popular for grassroots women leaders who have traditionally been systematically disadvantaged: ethnic minority women, religious minority women, and those with disabilities.

The rise of women political entrepreneurs in the ASEAN region reflects the opening of political and entrepreneurial space for women outside of formal political that is often not considered when looking at the number of women in parliaments. Channels for political participation and leadership have multiplied with the ubiquity of internet and social media usage, opening up new pathways for women to advance political change, at least for women with advantageous socioeconomic background, but not so much to women with poor background. Women leaders with disabilities, for instance, have been able to pursue higher education, a professional career, and activism – all thanks to online connectivity that allows school, work, and advocacy to be done at low-cost online. Digital technologies have also made the lives of people with disabilities better: they have more tools than ever before to allow them to improve their confidence in their ability to instigate and lead social change.

Women's positionality still matters: it dictates the nature and length of pathways to political leadership. Pathways to political leadership have different lengths, from short to moderate to long. Pathway lengths reflect the number and type of barriers each woman faces in her pursuit of political leadership. A trailblazer leader who co-founds a new organisation with others may be able to overcome barriers by leveraging their co-founders' assets, such as financial resources or networks, to overcome their own barriers. This suggests the need to examine the potential benefits of "asset pooling" – collectively combining women's assets to evade barriers to leadership more effectively. Women who share the same vision for social and political change, who may come from different backgrounds, should be encouraged to partner with one another instead of trying to do it alone.



Photo credit: Golkar

Hetifah Sjaifudin, member of parliament, Indonesia

Having more women in leadership roles helps increase avenues for decision-making by women. Women leaders in the ASEAN region have been able to make more space for high-level decision making even in organisations that have no room for them. Our findings indicate that many women leaders demanded institutional and policy changes that would allow for more women to make decisions and set policy agenda in organisations that did not have such policies. They found male allies for their cause and attempted to push for change, often eliciting criticism and prejudice from their peers. Women who are most successful at ensuring they are at the decision-making table are trailblazers: they create an organisational structure that supports women as decision makers.

Overall, women political leaders in the ASEAN region are on the rise in all facets of society. However, their political leadership might not be as visible since we continue to focus on women politicians as the only examples of women in political leadership. Once we expand the base and concept of political leadership, we can better take stock of the varied forms and ways in which women advance and pursue leadership for political change.

Violence against women in politics (VAWP)

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) has gained worldwide attention as an emerging area of research and advocacy in the past decade. Krook (2017) argues that the global increase of women's participation in politics as politicians, activists, and voters, has also given rise to attacks against women in politics. VAWP is a form of gender-based violence (GBV) that includes any "act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realising their political rights and a range of human rights" (UN Women, 2021). These may include preventing women from running for political office, exercising their votes freely, being able to campaign freely, and/or enjoying freedom of speech and assembly. VAWP can be in public or private spheres and can be perpetrated by family members, members of the public, and the state.

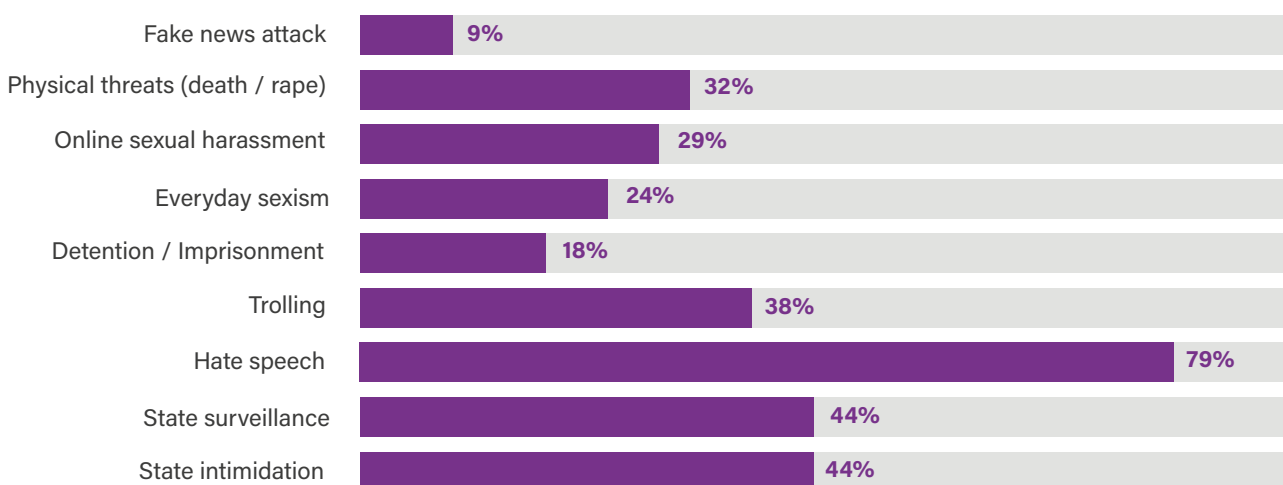
While international organisations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have recognised the general existence of the problem of violence against women in politics, data that illustrates its magnitude is profoundly lacking. Our focus on VAWP is firstly to produce original empirical data on how women political leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand experience it and in what ways. VAWP constitutes visible, hidden, and invisible barriers to realising full women's political participation and has been cited as reasons for why many women politicians in Europe consider leaving politics.

Understanding the extent and form of VAWP in the ASEAN region will help us to comprehend barriers to women leaders' entry to and continuance in politics and provide crucial insights to designing programs to help reduce this problematic phenomenon.

Out of the 45 women leaders interviewed, 88% reported having experienced violence and harassment because of their political role. Grassroots political leaders are more likely to be victims than politicians: 94% of grassroots leaders have been subjected to VAWP compared to 82% of women politicians.

Figure 9: Forms of VAWP experienced by women political leaders.

Source: Authors



There are two broad types of VAWP: physical violence and online violence. Physical violence includes all forms of violence that occurs in person, such as:

- **verbal abuse**
- **death threats**
- **rape threats**
- **physical attacks**
- **sexism**
- **sexual harassment**
- **state surveillance and intimidation (such as being followed or photographed by state agencies)**
- **detention and imprisonment**

Online violence against women in politics are all forms of threats that occur online, such as:

- **hate speech**
- **sexual harassment online**
- **trolling**
- **fake news attacks**
- **physical threats made online**

Online violence against women in politics is more commonly experienced by women leaders than physical violence. In a digitally connected world, digital media engagement is often not something aspiring women leaders can afford to avoid. Of all the online violence suffered by woman leaders, hate speech tops the chart at 79% of women leaders having experienced this kind of online violence, followed by trolling (38%), physical threats (31%), sexual harassment (29%) and fake news attacks (9%).

Hate speech is a type of expression that harms in a manner that is comparable with a physical injury (Brown 2015). Hate speech is directed against a specified or easily identified individual or group of individuals that can stigmatise them by reinforcing and perpetuating systemic discrimination (Gelber 2019). Social media platforms such as Facebook have found combatting hate speech extremely challenging due to the fluid nature of the content (Sinpeng

et al. 2019). Women leaders interviewed in this study have been targeted by hate speech due to their gender, age, political beliefs, ethnicity, religion, and/or disability.

Women political leaders also get trolled online, especially women who are active on social media and outspoken. The more women engage with social media, particularly on sensitive issues, the more abuse they receive. Everyday sexist remarks such as body shaming or slut shaming are experienced as online comments and replies on Facebook and Twitter. Sexual harassment sometimes occurs in the private inbox of women leaders.

Women leaders in countries with low levels of freedom also experience significant levels of state repression. Thailand in particular stands out in this case as both politicians (in opposition) and grassroots leaders experience high levels of state repressive tactics. These leaders reported being frequently “visited” by police or security agents at their homes or work. They were followed, photographed, and threatened. 6 out of the 17 leaders interviewed were detained and imprisoned for their political leadership. Young activist leaders are the most vulnerable to VAWP.

This study has demonstrated the widespread nature of VAWP affecting women political leaders in the three country case studies. The prevalence of both physical and online forms of violence add to the list of barriers women leaders face – and one to which there is no easy solution. A few politicians who did not use social media much reported not having experienced VAWP, but not being active online is not an easy option for women who seek political leadership.

Case insights

Indonesia

Women's participation in the electoral system in Indonesia has entered a new era since the introduction of the 30% quota for women's candidacy in elections in 2003. This women's electoral quota has led to an increase in women parliamentarians, raising the demand for women political candidates to contest elections at both national and local levels. Becoming a politician is a particularly attractive option for women from political families and women who have established connections with political parties. As one politician of a political family notes:

"I understand that as a wife of a former governor for two periods (10 years), I get advantage from it. But it does not mean I never work hard to mobilise voters. The voters in my electorate areas are in remote places and they do not really know my husband's work during his time as a governor. The only advantage I can make use of is the network of women organisation, which I used to lead as a wife of a governor"

While the current percentage of women leaders in national parliament is at 21%, this figure is a major achievement compared to the level of women's participation during Soeharto's authoritarian regime (1966-1998). During that era, the rate of women's participation in parliament ranged between 11-13% (Aspinall et al 2021:7), but they were selected by the party controlled heavily by the regime (Sucipto, 2011). This was coupled by a perception on women roles in public, including in politics, whereby women were considered subordinate to men, including in parliament, as part of existing patriarchy culture (Blackburn 2004). Other scholars have identified constraining factors including religion (Bessel, 2004) and institutional barriers such as the electoral system (Hillman, 2017; Prihatini 2019a; Prihatini 2019b; Satriyo 2014).

"As an activist, I don't see being a woman leader is a problem, because this is something that is supported by the CSO community. What is a problem is being young. People in Indonesia look down on you, as if you are inexperienced, amateur, and know nothing of this world. In meetings with public officials too, they look down on me, and I have to keep proving myself that despite my young age, I can do what senior people can do."

Yet, the change from closed-list to open-list proportional representation has raised the cost of pursuing political leadership for women. Candidates from the same parties are incentivised to compete with one another to garner the highest number of votes to secure a seat. This change of election system increases propensity for vote buying in a country already plagued by electoral malpractices. Our interview findings have revealed that one candidate in East Java province spent Rp 1 billion (64,000 USD) in the 2019 election. The rising costs of campaigning has presented additional barriers to women aspiring to pursue political leadership.

Textbox 7

Netty Prasetiyani, member of parliament, PKS

Netty entered national politics in 2019 when she won a seat in West Java. The spouse of the former governor of West Java province, her party, PKS used to uphold a rule that disallowed spouses from both being active in politics. This rule changed in 2017, which opened the door for Netty to run for office.

“Although my husband was a former governor of our province, not all voters in my electorate knew him, especially voters from lower class who did not watch news about my husband. I still have to work hard to mobilise voters.”



Photo credit: DPR RI

Netty used to head a women’s organisation, Dharma Wanita and PKK (two state initiated women’s organisations in Indonesia), and accompanied her husband while he was a governor, making her a familiar face in her electorate. She gained a lot of electoral support through her work leading women organisation and initiatives.

Main barriers to women’s political leadership in Indonesia

Politicians:

- Open-list proportional representation system that forces intraparty competition, raising the costs of candidacy.
- Internal party policies and practices that are not gender-sensitive and make it difficult for women members to participate in committee meetings (for example, scheduling meetings late in the evening or scheduling meetings while playing sports).
- Everyday sexism: objectifying women members, making sexist remarks during meetings, sexist jokes.
- Everyday ageism towards young women party members: disparaging comments about how young people do not know better and lack experience.

Grassroots leaders:

- Lack of clear procedures and code of conduct in workplace that would support gender-sensitive practices.
- Everyday ageism towards young women of CSO activists: disparaging comments about how young people do not know better and lack experience.

Factors supporting women's leadership in Indonesia

Politicians

- Gender quotas
- Family support in pursuing political leadership
- Financial resources
- Strong networks that can be mobilised for elections and campaigns

Grassroots leaders

- General knowledge and understanding on human rights values among NGOs in Indonesia, including gender equality.
- Support from donors on the necessity of gender equity in organisations.

Violence and harassment against women political leaders in Indonesia

Politicians

- Women local politicians are the most vulnerable to everyday sexism, both in person and online.
- Constituents pressure women politicians to act and behave like male politicians to get things done for them, but women politicians may have a different leadership style than their male counterparts.

Grassroots leaders

- Being active on social media is resource intensive and is likely to increase the likelihood of online abuse.
- Grassroots leaders who are active on social media experience more online harassment and abuse.

Thailand

Gender equity in political participation and leadership has experienced two extremes in Thailand in the past 20 years. On the one hand, Thailand has made the biggest gain in its cultural shift towards supporting women political leaders in comparison to its neighbouring states. It has also adopted a voluntary gender quota where political parties self-selected to participate in instituting women quotas when fielding candidates. On the other hand, Thailand is one of the most unsafe places for women political leaders in the ASEAN region. State violence and harassment against women political leaders in both formal and grassroots politics represents a constant and institutionalised feature of politics in the country.

Women political leaders have come a long way in Thailand. Two decades ago, only 6% of members of parliaments were women, this number increased to 16% in 2021. But Thailand's progress towards achieving better representation for women in formal politics has been marred by sharp fluctuations: whenever there was a military coup or military-backed governments, the number of women politicians plummeted. During the military dictatorship between 2014 and 2019, the number of women politicians in parliament dropped from 16% to 5% only to go back up to 16% once elections returned. The same pattern could be observed following the 2006 coup. For Thailand, the level of democracy seems to significantly help promote the number of women leaders in national parliaments.

Thailand is the only country under study where women political leaders have been detained and imprisoned in addition to routine surveillance, monitoring, and intimidation both in-person and online. Women political leaders were more vulnerable to this form of state violence due to their precarity and gender, with some reported having been sexually abused during detention (no equivalent report from

male counterparts have been noted). It is not uncommon for women leaders to say that they are “used to” police presence at their home or work. Military dominance in Thai politics institutionalised the state use of force against the political opposition (Sinpeng 2020). This oppression against regime critics and political dissent in general particularly impacts women activists and opposition politicians because they tend to have fewer resources to rely upon. As women tend not to be the main income earners but remain the primary caregivers in the family, when they are in jail it has a devastating effect on their families. Women also suffer more social backlash when being persecuted, as well as suffering sexual harassment and abuse while in detention at a greater rate than men. One activist recalled:

“I’m not afraid of police intimidation. This happens a lot. They should be afraid of me!”

On the positive side, there have been remarkable institutional and cultural changes that have made it easier for women to pursue political leadership roles in Thailand. At the party system level, the adoption of voluntary gender quota by some of the political parties in Thailand, such as the Democrat Party, the Future Forward Party (now Move Forward Party) and the Action Coalition Party, have helped more women to be approached and listed as party list candidates. The closed party-list system, as opposed to the open one which Thailand previously had, has helped to reduce competition among women candidates from the same party, especially during the primary race (Sawasdee 2020). The current 2017 constitution also played a role in helping well-placed women on the party lists to get elected. The constitution’s party-list MP calculation formula and its associated election laws helped parties that may not have won a large number of seats at the constituency level to make seat gains through the party-list calculations (McCargo and Alexander 2019). This way, women who were well-placed on the

party list of their respective parties, no matter how small, got elected.

On the electoral rules, one party-list MP who was a pro-democracy movement leader before and after the 2014 coup commented:

“There were several factors for our (party’s) victory. The party-list MP calculation formula based on the constitution and laws used all (constituency) votes. We had many candidates who came second and third places, so those votes didn’t go to waste.”

Women from political families have a significant advantage when pursuing political leadership, although success is not guaranteed. Our interviews with women politicians from political families demonstrate that political context matters as much as the family name in creating fertile ground for electoral success. One politician from a political family has had to fight hard to win votes in the constituency her father had long served because she was running for an opposition party. In a flawed election like the one in 2019, an opposition candidate could be weakened in their ability to compete freely and fairly if targeted by pro-government forces. Another politician from a dynastic political family also failed to get elected several times in her family’s constituency because she was a woman and was perceived to be an unsuitable politician. In the 2019 election, she was approached by a party that offered a spot on its party list, which eventually led to her electoral success.

Women from non-political families, especially those from Bangkok middle-class backgrounds who are associated with conservative parties used this fact to emphasise that they were driven by their own desire to bring about change and thus enter politics. Some even use this fact as a reason for choosing a party, as one young politician in her 30s who rose to the rank of party spokesperson noted:

Main barriers to women's political leadership in Thailand

“As you can see, I have nobody in my family who’s involved in politics. My family doesn’t even support my decision to join politics. But I was interested in it. And I saw that the [party name removed] party was open to people like me who are not from political families or have no background in politics. The party gave me the opportunity to join politics.”

At the cultural level, Thai youths are leading the way in championing gender equity in women’s political leadership. Not only are they the most supportive group in society of reducing barriers for women’s participation and leadership in politics, but many of them also pursue leadership roles themselves, both as grassroots activists and politicians. The pivotal role young women play in leading the pro-democracy movements since 2020, both online and offline, demonstrates how much progressive young women ‘walk the talk’ when it comes to advancing political change. When asked about what she would do in her election campaign, an aspiring 29-year-old politician, a former pro-democracy activist who will run for the first time in the next election stated:

“I would go against the traditional powerplay between factions within the party. I would use the fact I’m from a new generation and that voters should give someone new a chance. I would also draw upon my quality as being idealistic and advocating human rights.”

Politicians:

- Very few political parties adopt an electoral quota to field as many women candidates as men. As the quota is not mandatory, parties lack incentives to implement them as they are seen as raising the cost of doing politics.
- Women politicians who reported having faced no barriers in becoming political leaders (63%) are elite women with strong ties to political parties (networker). They are women from political families, or influential women in business and media industry.
- Male political patrons remain influential in promoting certain women to positions of power. This is particularly the case for women who lack political experience and prior political networks.
- All nine women politicians interviewed who ran in the previous elections relied on their own financial resources when running for election or while in office. Constituency MPs carry the brunt of the financial burden as they have many social obligations (attending weddings, funerals, and school events) that keep the cost of participating in politics high.
- Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can become national politicians but it is extremely rare. It requires significant interventions from progressive political parties to invest in recruiting them.

Grassroots leaders

- Lack of financial resources and political networks represent the biggest barriers to success for grassroots leaders. These resources are not only required to start new organisations or initiatives, but also to help increase their influence and ability to affect change.

- Grassroots leaders tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As individuals, they lack powers to negotiate with other stakeholders (most of them are state agencies) in the causes they advocate. They are often dismissed as just “leaders of ordinary villagers”, not agents of change.
- Grassroots activists who transitioned into formal politics often did not continue to stay in politics due to the high levels of corruption.

Factors supporting women’s leadership in Thailand

Politicians

- Political parties that have some form of gender quota help bring many women into leadership roles.
- Leaders who leverage their existing networks well to mobilise support for their leadership find success.
- Women who find organisations that provide them maximum support and openness allow them to thrive and rise to leadership.
- Trailblazers who find success tend to be spinoffs of existing parties or organisations that can leverage networks of their former organisations.

Grassroots leaders

- Activists who become high-profile and garner followers online and offline tend to do well with raising awareness and media coverage on their activism.
- Social media savvy women leaders do better in mobilising support and recognition of their activism.
- Elite grassroots leaders have the skills and language abilities to attract funds from donors.

Violence and harassment against women in politics in Thailand

Politicians

- Women politicians from political opposition are subject to significant state repression including surveillance, detention, and imprisonment.
- Women politicians not in opposition are subject to everyday repression such as self-censorship and online surveillance.
- All women politicians are subject to online abuse and harassment, particularly hate speech, physical threats (death, rape), trolling, and fake news.
- Politicians generally find state repression distressing but are not too bothered by online abuse. They have mechanisms to relegate the online hate to their staff (such as delegating the task of social media monitoring to staff).

Grassroots leaders

- Grassroots leaders face a significant amount of state repression regardless of their political affiliation (if any). They are treated almost as traitors and are subject to frequent monitoring and harassment by state security agencies.
- Grassroots leaders face significant online abuse and harassment especially if they are active on social media.

Textbox 8

Chonticha Jaengrew, a trailblazer-activist-networker, Thailand

Chonticha is a well-known student activist, who helped lead the 2020 pro-democracy youth protests in Thailand. A long-time student activist, she cofounded the Democracy Restoration Group during Thailand's military dictatorship, which laid the groundwork for the mass student protests beginning in 2020.

Due to her political activism, she has received the most online abuse and harassment than any other political leader we interviewed. The nature of the abuse included death threats, hate speech and name calling as well as a disinformation campaign attacking her for being a mistress of a foreign correspondent. Much of the online abuse also materialised in real life as she regularly encounters verbal and physical attacks and threats. Her biggest barrier to political leadership is state repression.



Photo: Facebook

She is currently facing 30 charges, has been detained, and is facing a long imprisonment term. She experienced physical and emotional abuse during her time in prison. Recently, she declared her candidacy to run for an upcoming election in Thailand as a constituency candidate for Move Forward Party, whose founding members and current MPs are her friends from the student activist time.

Substantive representation of women in politics in Thailand

Politicians

- Only 1 out of 8 women politicians pursued women-focused policies and she was not elected (a party list candidate).
- Women politicians only spoke about women's issues when engaging with members of women's organisations.
- Once in power, half of the women politicians pursue women's issues.
- 3 out of 9 politicians were strongly against a gender quota in elections.

Grassroots leaders

- Only 1 out of 8 grassroots leaders focus on women's issues. This is largely due to the fact that none of the leaders interviewed are in charge of women-focused organisations.
- Grassroots leaders see their leadership as the most effective form of gender activism as they lead by example.

Overall, the prospects for greater women's leadership in politics for Thailand are promising. Cultural norms and practices that had served to stifle progress towards gender equity have become less salient, paving the way for more progressive voices to push for change. However, some key structural barriers remain in the political and socioeconomic realms that continue to act like an entrenched barrier to women's political leadership.

Malaysia

The historic election of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition in Malaysia's 14th general election in 2018 ushered in the best performing year for women in politics in the history of Malaysia. This election brought in the country's first woman deputy prime minister, Dr Wan Azizah, the highest number of cabinet ministers (5) and a nearly 5% increase in the number of women elected to national parliament. With the PH in power, there was real hope that it would be a gamechanger for women wanting to pursue political leadership. PH had campaigned on instituting a minimum 30% quota for women's representation in parliament and state assemblies, but the coalition collapsed before implementation could be realised. As former deputy minister of women, family and community development said: "The problem is not that we lack women leaders, but lack seats. Party presidents must, when they give seats to women, ensure that it is a winnable seat and not merely to fulfil a quota."¹¹

Malaysia's relatively low number of women in national politics has long been a subject of much debate. At 15% women representation in national parliament, it is among the lowest rates in the ASEAN region. Such poor performance is surprising given that the most dominant political party, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has a very high women's membership rates and a very active women's wing (Mulakala 2013). To tackle this issue, two political parties – Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) – have instituted the 30% gender quota for party leadership positions and in fielding candidates, respectively. As Izharuddin (2019) argues Malaysia's single-member district electoral system disadvantages women candidates as parties are under pressure to run incumbents, who are usually male. The supply has outstripped the demand side for women candidates and many women politicians in Malaysia admit that they are not seen as valuable within their own political parties.¹²

Malaysia's deeply divided politics has been argued to present additional barriers to women minorities (Fee and Appudurai, 2011). With political cleavages entrenched along racial, ethnic, and religious lines, identity politics plays out in myriad ways for minority women political leaders, providing both opportunities and challenges in seeking power (Ng 2010). Our study has found that the majority of women leaders who identified as part of a minority did not see their visible identities as an impediment to their pursuit of political leadership. Only 2 out of the 10 interviewed, who have disability, believe their minority status has made their path towards leadership difficult.

Cultural barriers appear to be persistent impediments to advancing women's political leadership in Malaysia. One of our key findings is that public attitude towards women in political leadership in this country is the second lowest in Southeast Asia, despite significant progress made in the last decade. Young, religious Malaysians with low levels of education and income are the most opposed to the idea that women can be better politicians than men. A factor that may explain this persistent ambivalence towards women in political leadership positions is Islamisation. Recent Islamisation in social, legal, and political life of Malaysians (especially Malay Muslims), such as the change in Sharia and family law that facilitated a rise in polygamy, has been found (Olivier, 2016).

Socioeconomic barriers towards becoming political leaders for Malaysian women seem to be flattening out in terms of educational attainment. All women leaders, both in formal politics and in the grassroots leadership, have at least a university degree – a finding that sets Malaysia apart from Thailand and Indonesia. This is likely the result of the reversed gender gap in Malaysia's higher education in the past decade, whereby Malaysian women outnumbered their male counterparts both in enrolment and completion of university education (Alam and Sadat, 2020).

Another note of optimism is that women leaders who struggled financially growing up were able to become better off by the time they assume political leadership, both in formal politics and informal politics. The growth of their economic wellbeing was a direct result of better educational attainment, which then led to better career opportunities and better access to opportunities more generally. While gender equality in political leadership is a multidimensional issue, the gains made by Malaysian women in reducing educational gender gaps made them better placed to pursue political leadership opportunities.

Textbox 9

The Activist Profile

Who: A youth and feminism activist in her 20s, minority status

Background: non-elite, financial hardship as child

Assets: years as student political activist

Caring responsibilities: minimal

Entry to leadership: founded a spin off organisation promoting female youth agenda and democracy

Leadership success: As a founder of her organisation her leadership was immediate

Reported barrier to leadership: moderate

Main barriers to women's political leadership in Malaysia

Politicians:

- Only opposition parties have so far adopted a 30% electoral quota in fielding candidates and party leadership positions. As the quota is not mandatory, parties lack incentives to implement them as they are seen as raising the cost of doing politics.
- Women politicians who reported having faced no barriers in becoming political leaders are elite women from political families.
- Women politicians from non-political families who faced few barriers to becoming leaders are those who were very involved with political parties and held senior level position in the Wanita (woman's wing).
- Political newcomers without strong political and business ties tend to enter formal politics first at the state level. They gain experience and political capital from competing in elections. Successful newcomers are those who have received endorsement from existing politicians (both male and female).

Grassroots leaders

- Lack of financial resources and political networks represent the biggest barriers to success for grassroots leaders. These resources are not only required to start new organisations or initiatives, but also to help increase their influence and ability to affect change.
- Most grassroots leaders have had their formative years in university where they became interested and involved in political activism. Subsequently they either continued their advocacy with organisations they were involved in as a student or started their own.

Factors supporting women's political leadership in Malaysia

Politicians

- Party networks and supporters for leadership from party leaders are the most crucial reasons for successful women politicians.
- Politicians belonging to parties that institute gender quotas do benefit from them but their support for such affirmative action policies are lukewarm.

Grassroots leaders

- Prior experience of activism provided grassroots leaders with hands-on experience, direct exposure to the ins and outs of advocacy work and the networks they may rely upon when pursuing leadership.
- Endorsement from political leaders, such as politicians and other influencers, appears to help increase the profile of leaders who establish new organisations.

Violence and harassment against women in politics in Malaysia

Politicians

- Women politicians from the political opposition are subject to state repression from the Special Branch in the form of surveillance and intimidation (being followed).
- All politicians reported being subject to online abuse with hate speech being the most prevalent.
- All women politicians suffer from everyday sexism online.

Grassroots leaders

- Grassroots leaders face significant amount of state repression with 2 out of 5 leaders reported having been harassed by the Special Branch.
- All grassroots leaders face online abuse, hate speech, trolling, sexual harassment, body shaming, and slut shaming. A few also received discriminatory remarks due to their minority status.
- Being young and active on social media appears to make these activist leaders more vulnerable to both state repression and online abuse.

Recommendations for organisations seeking to advance women's political leadership

- More political parties need to adopt gender quotas, even voluntary ones. A best practice case study of parties with successful quota implementation may provide an incentive for others to follow.
- Breaking down cultural barriers to women's political leadership might require a piecemeal approach that is segmented into different target groups in society. These may include targeted programs for young people, LGBTQ+, minority groups, and persons with disabilities. While overall programme aims should be educational, they can be designed to enhance strategic cooperation across interest groups.
- Social media training should be provided to all aspiring women leaders so they can learn how to use it safely and what to do when they encounter online abuse. The key to this training is to provide strategic advice and resources to women leaders in the event that online violence occurs. Active engagement with tech platforms, such as Meta and Google, in promoting safe and civil online conduct for women political leaders should be strongly encouraged.
- Continued pressure from the international community regarding the level of state repression in the ASEAN region is crucial to help promote democratic politics and reduce violence in the long term. There is strong evidence that democratic politics helps to reduce prevalence of VAWP and improves gender equality outcomes, which need to be continually addressed.
- Money politics (vote buying) continues to hurt the chances of women to fully compete in elections. More studies are needed to understand what kind of electoral system and party system can enhance the chances of women getting elected.
- Training to improve digital campaigning and marketing skills as well as crowd-funding skills might be useful to all women leaders. It will provide necessary skills to support more trailblazers and non-elite women entering politics.

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