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Strengthening women's roles in democracy through elections and other democratic processes in Southeast Asia

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DISCLAIMER

The content of this briefing paper reflects the discussions and recommendations put forth by participants of the [6th Bali Civil Society & Media Forum](#) (BCSMF) and WFD’s inaugural [Democracy Action Partnership](#) (DAP), which took place on 28–30 November 2023 in Bali, Indonesia. These represent important contributions to efforts towards equality of political participation but do not represent the full extent of WFD’s programming and policy work on women’s political leadership, more of which can be found on [our website](#).

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In November 2023, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) co-hosted the [6th Bali Civil Society & Media Forum](#) (BCSMF) with the [Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and other partners as well as the inaugural [Democracy Action Partnership](#) (DAP). This briefing paper expands on the insights and recommendations exchanged during the BCSMF working group on women's roles in democracy through elections and other democratic processes as well as the DAP which dissected the barriers created or sustained by [violence against women in politics](#). Over 200 civil society and media reformers from across the Southeast Asia region and beyond participated in the two forums.

This thematic focus aligns with WFD's ongoing work on [advancing equal societies through women's political leadership and participation in Southeast Asia](#) and builds on the multi-stakeholder discussions that took place during the launch of [WFD's study on the barriers to women's political leadership in Southeast Asia](#) on the margins of the 5th BCSMF in December 2022.

The analyses presented in this briefing paper formulate several recommendations discussed by participants of the two forums to address the identified barriers and advance women's entry into politics and meaningful participation in democracy. In preparing this briefing paper, the authors conducted an additional interview with Nenden Sekar Arum, a digital democracy researcher and advocate associated with the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network.

In formulating the recommendations presented in this briefing paper, the authors reflected on Hannah Pitkin's 1967 work on the Conception of Women's Political Representation, particularly on descriptive and substantive representations. Descriptive representation emphasises the importance of politics of presence. In this regard, discussions often focus on the presence of women in politics with the aim of having more women take part in politics to challenge the otherwise predominantly male presence and viewpoints in policy-making processes. Substantive representation, on the other hand, focuses on actions that champion the interests of women and other marginalised groups. As such, while efforts to increase the level of women's representation in politics continue to be relevant, collective advocacy for actions that defend transformational policies toward more inclusive politics is equally pivotal.

Addressing barriers to women’s entry into politics

In this section, the briefing paper discusses the barriers to women’s entry into politics that the participants of BCSMF and DAP identified. These barriers are categorised across political/economic, legal/institutional/formal, and cultural/normative structures. Within the scope of political/economic structure, the barriers are often related to access to power and resources. Barriers in the legal/institutional/formal structure occur in institutional setups such as political parties, parliaments, as well as legal and regulatory frameworks. In the cultural/normative structure, barriers are often associated with underlying social, cultural, and/or religious contexts. Strengthening women’s political participation is therefore instrumental to increase the presence of women in political institutions.

| Political/economic barriers | Legal/institutional/formal barriers | Cultural/normative barriers |
|---|---|--|
| Lack of voter education on inclusive politics and women’s roles in public affairs | Violence against women in politics, including those that occur during election cycles (offline and online) | Anti-feminist and anti-gender movements/ideologies that undermine women’s political participation and leadership |
| | Political dynasties and nepotism/cronyism in political parties | |
| | Lack of funding and resources for women’s empowerment through political training, education, and campaign financing | |
| Weak understanding of the benefits to women’s political participation | Limited budget allocated by political parties for promoting women’s political participation | Unequal distribution of care work responsibilities between women and men |
| | Expensive costs of political campaigns | |
| | High political party nomination fees | |

The following table presents the recommendations discussed by the participants of BCSMF and DAP alongside practical context, which were formulated for civil society and media stakeholders to undertake. These actions could be relevant although with adjustments based on the underlying contexts of implementation. They were informed by the experiences and expertise of stakeholders whose work are focused on women’s political participation in Southeast Asia.

| Objective 1: Addressing barriers to women’s entry into politics | |
|--|---|
| Action Points | In Practice |
| Recommendations for civil society stakeholders | |
| <p>Advocate for comprehensive policies (or stronger implementation of existing ones) aimed at eliminating violence against women in politics. This can manifest in various forms— from psychological, physical, economic, to sexual—in both physical spaces and/or online platforms.</p> <p>Policies pertaining to violence against women in politics are crucial because many women are still vulnerable to violent responses when they attempt to take up their spaces in politics. Women legislative candidates, for instance, regularly find themselves on the receiving end of acts or threats of violence such as intimidation, derogatory remarks, gendered disinformation, and sexual harassment. Such policies are key to ensuring a safe space for women to actively participate in politics.</p> | <p>Civil society demands for stronger legal framework on violence against women in Indonesia, for example, have successfully led to the passage of the Sexual Violence Law and concerted efforts to enforce implementation frameworks, mainstream gender-sensitive mechanisms among law enforcement agents, and mobilise public funding for local agencies tasked with handling sexual violence crimes, including those committed within a political context. In Thailand, enactment of the Gender Equality Act to protect individuals from gender-based discrimination has led to measures aimed at enhancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. This includes the incorporation of gender sensitivity in education curricula, implementation gender-responsive budgeting, and collection of sex-disaggregated data to inform policy-making processes.</p> |

Identify existing legal frameworks that perpetuate the traditional gender roles inhibiting women’s political participation. A combination of research and campaign efforts could raise public awareness of the impact that those frameworks have and generate demands for policy reforms.

[A 2021 study by Cakra Wikara Indonesia](#) found that certain regulations hinder women from participating in politics or advancing their career in public service due to provisions that lack gender sensitivity. In Indonesia, the Local Government Law does not have any maternity leave provisions for heads of local governments, which effectively put women in such positions at a disadvantage. The Marriage Law, which designates men as heads of families and their female spouses as simply “housewives” exacerbates the problem of unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, which the study found to be deterring women from pursuing higher positions in their careers.

Advocate for policies that facilitate a fairer distribution of care work responsibilities. To start with, this could focus on introducing equal paternity leave policy to ensure that women do not carry disproportionate care work responsibilities, which include caring not only children but also the elderly and ill persons. The same rights should extend to adoptive parents as well. In the longer term, equal paternity leave policy could help lessen the default expectation on women as primary (and often) sole care givers. Paternity leave policies already exist in the region, albeit with varying degrees of effectiveness. However, these policies are ineffective. Studies on how gender norms manifest in different social and cultural contexts could help stakeholders understand further actions for reform in this area.

Indonesia introduced a two-day paternity leave policy for fathers at childbirth or miscarriage in 2003, which is far from adequate. Thailand has a 15-day leave policy available to fathers who work in the public sector, but none for those in the private sector. Malaysia gives new fathers a 7-day paternity leave quota but only if they have been employed for at least 12 months.

In terms of best practice, stakeholders can learn from the experience of [Sweden’s paternity leave policy](#) which employs a “use-it-or-lose-it” or “daddy quotas” approach. While initially aimed at increasing men’s participation in care work, inclusive formulation of the policy provides equal paternity leave rights for birth and adoptive parents regardless of their sex or partnership status. High representation of women in politics is [often cited](#) as both a driving factor and successful outcome of Sweden’s equal paternity leave rights policy implementation.

Demand political parties and legislatures to develop and enforce procedural standards and/or codes of conduct on responding to cases of violence against women. These policies are crucial considering that women are still vulnerable to violent responses when they attempt to take part in politics. Women legislative candidates, for instance, regularly find themselves on the receiving end of violent threats, intimidation, coercion, and aggression [simply because they are women](#). Internal safeguards within the structures of political institutions such as political parties and legislatures could create a safer space for women to participate in politics.

Pro-active data collection is crucial for political institutions across all administrative levels to establish a reliable evidence base on the prevalence of violence against women in politics. Internal grievance redress mechanisms would further complement existing measures or provide alternatives in the absence of adequate ones.

Considering how social media platforms can be a fertile site for violence against women in politics in the online space, civil society could additionally demand technological companies to establish clear guidelines and investigation procedure that create better response to reports of violence against women in politics on their platforms.

Safeguard and advocate for effective enforcement of affirmative action policies that facilitate women’s entry into political institutions, including legislatures and political parties.

While the relevance and implementation of affirmative action policies vary between countries in Southeast Asia, its implementation has helped trigger higher representation of women in politics. Incorporation of an intersectional understanding of identities across class, race, ethnic, social, political, economic, and cultural categories is a crucial factor that could determine effective enforcement of affirmative action policies.

Affirmative action policy is enshrined in Indonesia’s Election Law, which requires political party nomination list to have at least 30% women legislative candidates with Election Commission regulations adding a “semi-zipper” system to ensure that women are not concentrated on the lower region of party lists. This has helped the number of women occupying parliament seats to increase from 11.09% (2004) to 17.86% (2009), 17.32% (2014), and 20.52% (2019).

In countries with no affirmative action policy, political parties have voluntarily instituted gender quota as well. In Malaysia, the People’s Justice Party (PKR) and Democratic Action Party (DAP) set a 30% minimum quota for women in their leadership structure and nomination lists, respectively. In Thailand, the Democrat Party, Move Forward Party (formerly Future Forward Party), Equality Party, and Commoners’ Party enforced affirmative action policy by instituting special considerations for more women, LGBT+ individuals, and members of minority groups in their nomination lists.

Advocate for affirmative action policies mandating the allocation of sufficient political party funding to support women’s participation in internal regulations and legislations.

Political parties must then mobilise appropriate financial resources to close the gaps that put women at a disadvantage. This could include initiatives such as, but not limited to, providing funds for women candidates during election campaign, facilitating capacity building workshops, and raising awareness among potential voters of the significance and benefits that come with more diverse political institutions.

Participants of BCSMF and DAP identified that in the status quo, women experience significant resource constraints especially at the initial stages of entering politics. This is also related to the overarching gender pay gaps which often result in women having limited access to the levels of disposable income necessary to underwrite a career in politics.

While women fundamentally have the same potential as men to succeed in politics, opportunities and access to dedicated resources remain unequal in large part due to a long history of marginalisation and exclusion from politics. In cases where political parties receive public funding, it would be important to set a minimum percentage that must be allocated to support women’s political participation and identify other mechanisms—such as removing candidate registration fees for women—to address cost of politics as a barrier to women’s participation.

Recommendations for media stakeholders

Enforce mechanisms to increase women’s presence and leadership in news media organisations. This could be aimed at increasing the number of women professionals in media organisations, but also at mainstreaming gender perspectives in news reporting as well as challenging perpetuated gender stereotypes and biases.

Several studies in the United States found that higher presence of women in news media organisations [fosters a collaborative working environment](#) and [promotes a more diverse reporting style](#). [An examination of all-women newspaper management teams](#) revealed that values such as teamwork, collaboration, and work-life balance—traits often associated with a “feminised” organisational culture—create a workplace culture that prioritises positive angles on news reporting and fairly treats workers irrespective of gender.

Incorporate gender sensitivity in news reporting. Trainings in collaboration with civil society and industry experts could help journalists, editors, and other relevant job functions in news media organisations to incorporate gender sensitivity in news reporting.

Ahead of the 2023 election, WFD organised a series of workshops for Thai journalists and developed a [manual for gender-sensitive reporting](#). In Indonesia, professional associations such as the [Association of Independent Journalists \(AJI\)](#) regularly provide gender sensitivity trainings for journalists across the country.

Mainstream gender perspective in news media reporting. It is important for media organisations to ensure gender equality by diversifying the perspectives applied in the production of their content. News reports could also aim to reveal the gendered nature of issues not traditionally considered as “women’s issues” such as wars, conflicts, security threats, religious affairs, climate change, and elections. Doing so would not only elevate the portrayal of women and highlight their contributions beyond topics that are stereotypically associated with women such as domestic work, beauty, entertainment, and lifestyle, but also improve public perception of women as capable leaders. In political news reporting, this could be done, for instance, by focusing more on the capacity, experience, policies, and agendas of women politicians.

The media sector has recorded [limited progress in improving the coverage of women and the representation of women in decision-making roles in the media industry](#). News coverage of women tend to perpetuate gender stereotypes and feature men as the preferred sources of information. This makes news media reporting ineffective in portraying the perspectives of women and other gender and sexual minority groups.

This is especially true in political news reporting, in which women politicians tend to receive superficial and proportionally less coverage. When they do get coverage, the focus tends to be on things that are not relevant to their political agendas, such as their physical appearance, spouses, outfits, and family connections. [A study on gender and media representations](#) found that exposure to such representations in media appears to reinforce society's beliefs in gender stereotypes and endorsement of traditional gender norms. [Another study](#) revealed that media sexism has a significant negative impact on the level of political ambitions among women.

Addressing barriers to meaningful women’s political participation

Participants of BCSMF and DAP also identified barriers to meaningful women’s political participation and proposed recommendations to enable more women to be part of decision-making processes. Meaningful women’s political participation will not only add more diverse perspectives that inform public policies and services but is also key to creating a more inclusive political environment.

| Legal/institutional/formal barriers | Normative and cultural barriers | Political economic barriers | Cross-cutting barriers |
|--|---|---|---|
| Rare instances of women holding strategic leadership positions in political institutions | Unequal distribution of care work responsibilities | Insufficient networking opportunities and platforms for women in politics | Discriminatory policies and practices against women in politics |
| Insufficient legal instruments that promote women’s political participation | Weak political support for non-traditional/progressive policies | | |

The following table presents a consolidated list of the recommendations that the participants of BCSMF and DAP discussed with an emphasis on facilitating collective actions by civil society and media stakeholders that would advance substantive representation of women in politics, especially in Southeast Asia.

| Objective 2: Addressing barriers to meaningful women’s political participation | |
|--|---|
| Action Points | In Practice |
| Recommendations for civil society stakeholders | |
| <p>Advocate for inclusive design of public infrastructures, government buildings, and political party offices.</p> <p>Facilities such as daycare, nurseries, and inclusive healthcare centres would help women to participate more actively and meaningfully in public life. The availability of these facilities would remove the challenges faced by women who often assume disproportionately more domestic and care work responsibilities. This is also in line with international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which mandates the creation of an enabling environment for women's participation in public life.</p> | <p>An inclusive and safe workspace is fundamental for women to be able to perform their work well. In the field of politics, Lena Wängnerud outlines three principles of gender-sensitive parliaments: the implementation of equal opportunities for women and men to influence internal parliamentary working procedures, the creation of room for women’s interests and concerns on the political agenda, and the production of gender-sensitive legislation.</p> <p>Stakeholders could learn from the experience of the Seoul Metropolitan Government in South Korea which introduced a Universal Design Guidelines in 2017 to create a convenient environment for all citizens regardless of their physical condition or ability, sense, and cognition. In Singapore, the Building and Construction Agency implements a Universal Design principle to create an environment that is usable by all people without the need for adaptation or specialised design, such as barrier-free ramps, lactation rooms, and braille and tactile signage.</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Advocate for affirmative action policies that compel political parties to assign strategic political positions to women. This includes positions with decision-making authorities in internal political party structure, parliamentary committee, cabinet posts, and other public institutions. Political parties must also allocate sufficient funding to support their women members in performing their duties effectively.</p> | <p>The previous section includes a recommendation to advocate for affirmative action policy in political party nominations during elections. In this context, an affirmative action policy is aimed at accelerating the transformation of women’s political participation into women’s political leadership.</p> <p>In Indonesia, for instance, improvement in the overall representation of women in the national parliament is not followed by an increase in the number of women in committee leadership positions, which poses major challenges to promote inclusive legislations and political processes.</p> |
| <p>Demand political institutions to conduct public campaigns, research, and advocacy aimed at creating more inclusive spaces for women’s political participation. Comprehensive procedure and/or robust code of conduct, which include grievance redress mechanisms as well as prevention and response measures to sexual violence cases, are instrumental in creating a safe space for women in politics.</p> | <p>The previous section provided arguments and evidence indicating that violence against women in politics, which manifest in different forms, can dissuade women’s political participation. Intimidation, derogatory remarks, coercion, and discrimination divert attention away from the substance of women’s political contributions and arguments. For example, women are often labelled as “emotional” or “irrational” when speaking out and expressing their opinions. Sometimes, these demeaning remarks would be conveyed in a humorous manner by their male peers. And if they call it out, then they would further be branded as being “difficult” to work with. Empirical studies on the pressing need for an inclusive politics can be helpful to urge transformational practices.</p> |
| <p>Reinforce collaborations between women politicians, civil society stakeholders, and other allies. This could aim towards establishing stronger coalitions or networks of women politicians at the local, national, regional, and international levels.</p> | <p>Solidarity and collaborations could amplify women’s agenda across levels of engagement and influence. Regional network of women politicians such as WFD’s ASEAN women political leaders’ coalition for change, for example, could foster information exchange, experience sharing, evidence dissemination, benchmarking, and coordination of collective actions. Multi-stakeholder engagement with women in the civil society sector could further strengthen collaboration between women politicians and mobilise more resources to creating an inclusive environment.</p> |

Recommendations for media stakeholders

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Engage more women as subject matter experts and credible sources of information. Conscious efforts by news media organisations to diversify the expertise and views incorporated into their reporting would help increase the visibility of women, including in the field of politics. Greater opportunities for women to discuss public policies, comment on current affairs, and share their expertise are essential for women to meaningfully participate in politics.</p> | <p>Owing to its male predominance, political discourse is often dominated by male-centric views which lack gender perspectives and sensitivities. Whereas women tend to receive less exposure for their successes. The media plays a significant role in ensuring that their news reporting accommodates a more diverse range of perspectives, which could further promote women’s political participation.</p> <p>The BBC’s 50:50 Equality Project, which is a voluntary self-assessment of the balance of representation in their content output, is a notable example of how media organisations can aim towards removing this barrier while benchmarking and tracking progress based on actual data.</p> |
| <p>Report and scrutinise violence against women in politics (including sexist and degrading remarks) in news media reporting and coverage. This includes holding public officials and politicians who make sexist or degrading remarks about women accountable.</p> | <p>Public officials and politicians are often considered as exemplary figures of authority. However, they could be responsible of creating an unsafe environment for women in politics, such as by making sexist and degrading remarks. The media is often the first line of defence against narratives and/or actions that could endanger women in politics. Robust media scrutiny and reporting are essential to address these harmful narratives and actions.</p> |
| <p>Facilitate peer exchange networks to promote and increase uptake of gender-sensitive reporting. This could especially help media organisations with fewer resources to learn about the application of gender sensitivity in news reporting and establish a platform for knowledge exchange and experience sharing.</p> | <p>Objectifying portrayals of women remain prevalent in news media reporting. There remain media organisations that discuss women politicians from superficial angles such as physical appearance, facial features, outfits, and private relationships. Networks of media professionals could help promote wider uptake of gender-sensitive reporting in the industry. Peer exchange of good practices could help widen the dissemination of gender-sensitive reporting across the media sector.</p> |
| <p>Build a regional media coalition in Southeast Asia. The coalition could be a space for media organisations to exchange information and highlight the success of women’s political participation and leadership.</p> | <p>A regional media coalition could aim towards developing a joint platform where various media organisations mobilise their resources to promote gender-sensitive reporting. Doing so could create a “race to the top” competition among media stakeholders to perform better in gender-sensitive reporting, similar to the BBC’s 50:50 equality project which has inspired similar initiatives to ensure balance representation across the media industry.</p> |

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