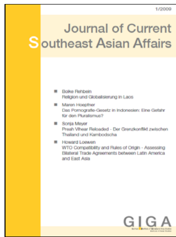

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Iwanaga, Kazuki (ed.) (2008), *Women's Political Participation and Representation in Asia. Obstacles and Challenges*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, = Women and Politics in Asia No. 2

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What is astonishing about this wide-ranging volume on women's political participation in Asia and the obstacles hindering it is not the variety of hurdles Asian women face, but their similarity. Wherever women happen to live – in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka –, the obstacles encountered by women who want to go into politics (in contrast to voting where percentages are always high) are not only formidable, but (sadly) predictable. Kazuki Iwanaga identifies these in his introductory chapter as social, cultural, political and economic obstacles. The hurdles often boil down to selection processes that exclude women, cultural resistance against women in the public sphere (regardless of their religion, the standard of female education and women's activity in the job market), and widespread assumptions that women are inferior and weak and therefore unable to cope with the demands and pace of politics. None of these insights are terribly new, but in his theoretical chapter Iwanaga also discusses the impact of women in politics in general (the descriptive versus substantive debate). While he does attribute right and wrong in this debate, he tends to support the substantive side when he points out the fact that women only tend to assert their interests (as opposed to adapting to the will of the majority) once their percentage has risen above 15%. (This figure probably holds true for minorities in general, not just for women.) In spite of reserved seats and quotas, few of the countries in the sample have managed to reach this figure yet. The author also points out that the assumption that it is easier for women to go into politics in PR electoral systems is not altogether wrong, but needs to be modified from case to case.

Andrea Fleschenberg presents results from a comparative study and concludes that women in Asian politics – and especially those in positions such as head of government/ state or as opposition leaders – are tame kittens rather than roaring tigresses, something she substantiates with a wealth of statistical evidence. She illustrates the vast gap between politically active and powerful elite women and the low political awareness and participation of women of lower social standing. She also claims that the intangible influence that a woman at the top has on women's perceptions in the course of time cannot be measured. Fleschenberg mainly concentrates on the four South Asian states of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, but also has an occasional glance at Malaysia and Burma as well. In short, the fact that women have been at the helm has not led to an increase in the social or economic status of women in general in most cases. Sadly, the reverse also

holds true: higher or general education or economic activity by women does not necessarily result in any greater political participation by women either. Most female political leaders came to power following the death of their husband or father or on the strength of a dynastic family ("familiars" [sic!]). They governed or ruled according to established male rules. It is rather disappointing that India was not granted a separate chapter in the study since, as Fleschenberg points out, it is atypical in some ways because it appears to buck some of the trends outlined: at least, Indira Gandhi did not come to power during a constitutional or political crisis, but a party one. She also had extensive prior political experience, contrary to what is claimed on p. 31: apart from her experience in the freedom struggle, she was President of the Congress Party and Minister of Broadcasting and Communication in the Congress government before becoming Prime Minister. At the time the book was written, it was still the case that no woman in South Asia had held an important ministerial position like the Minister of Foreign Affairs or Minister of Defence (although Chandrika was Minister of Defence by virtue of her office). Today, not only is the President of India a woman (Pratibha Patel), but the Speaker (Meira Kumar) and the Foreign Secretary (Nirupama Rao) are as well, just like the Minister of State for External Affairs (Preneet Kaur). So something does seem to be moving now, at least in India.

Drude Dahlerup rounds off the book with a short description of a research project on the effectiveness of quotas in politics and asks whether these actually "empower" women – and what "empowerment" means in the first place; she mainly defines it as the ability to choose, and as such, it can indeed arise from above or below. Thus, even minimal representation or quotas can offer a chance for women to make progress in politics. The truth of this assumption is dramatically illustrated by Elisabeth Schwarzhaupt, the first female minister for health and family affairs in West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. One of very few women in Parliament and the leader of her parliamentary party, she managed by filibustering and personal lobbying to (narrowly) abolish the regulation in the civil code (contradicting the Basic Law clause about equal rights) that a husband had the right to make the final decision in all questions regarding the joint life of a family, e.g. where it should live and where and how the children should be educated. Schwarzhaupt's party, the conservative CDU, was intensely chagrined. This incident should also sweep away Iwanaga's doubts about the ability of individual women to initiate or change legislation (p. 5).

As mentioned above, the empirical articles show considerable similarities in the way gender stereotypes, vested male interests and other political and social obstacles impede women despite the intention to improve their participation professed by nearly every government. It is precisely because

of this that the variations (which are often only small ones) acquire significance, as do the arguments with which greater female participation in formal politics is recommended. I would have really liked to see a more thorough analysis and discussion of the foundations of feminist theory here, which might have exposed the inherent contradictions contained in the empirical results. This might not have been possible within the context of the conference from which the volume emerged, but it would be a desirable follow-up to it.

The inherent contradictions mainly arise from the context-dependent arguments men use to deny women agency and which are then internalised by women themselves, thus sapping their own self-confidence. They thus doubly serve to exclude women and maintain male bastions without these contradictions being taken to the level of consciousness:

1. Women are weak, not interested in public affairs and should be and/or prefer to remain in the domestic sphere. This is frequently combined with the *non sequitur* that women's duties (household, children) prevent them from getting involved in the public sphere; the idea that men could share household duties or child care is never even considered.
2. Women are weak and incapable of joining the rough and tumble of politics.
3. If women are actually active in politics or even attain leading positions, they should "clean it up" and introduce a softer, more gentle and "moral" style of politics. At the same time, they are not only considered physically and socially inferior to men, but *morally* subordinate as well, especially in Buddhist countries.
4. If they behave as expected in politics, then women are labelled "fickle" and "indecisive". If they don't, then they are said to act in an "unfeminine" way and are often called "the only man in the Cabinet".

Put like that, it is obvious that these are all circular arguments where the actions of men serve to cement prior assumptions and make them reality. Jude Howell and Trudy Jacobsen are among the few authors who point out the contradictions in these assumptions. Jacobsen, for example, points out that men in Cambodia oppose education for girls since this could make the latter less demure. Men in these countries often verbally and even physically attack women who dare to go into politics and thus make them withdraw "voluntarily". Mistakes made by women are not political mistakes, but gender ones. These arguments constitute a depressing sort of recurring theme in all the articles, notwithstanding the political and cultural differences in the countries at issue.

As mentioned above, though, some differences do exist. In East Asia, or so the articles suggest, the increasing participation of women in politics and government is officially and academically welcomed because *women can then represent women's issues* (e.g. in Korea, Japan and Taiwan). The article on Taiwan argues from a feminist viewpoint that women bring different issues to the floor because of their different experience of life and that they should include this in politics.

What are women's issues exactly? Children, health, education – the so-called "soft" issues are all mentioned regularly.[1] The word "soft" means "irrelevant" and consequently of low prestige here. Issues like defence, foreign affairs or the economy are regarded as vital and relevant areas in which women are not even envisaged to take part. Only the article on China questions this preference: it points out that although women are considered soft, they are still thought of as being incapable of "doing" politics because they are unable to be diplomatic, negotiate or mediate! (Howell, p. 60). Thus, a vicious circle is created that makes women representatives of their gender and denies them any personal differences.

Some theoretical problems arise here which it would be wise to discuss further. If women are regarded as representatives of their gender, for example (just like minority leaders are viewed as representatives of their ethnic or religious or whatever group), then that means that 50% or more of the population is assigned a minority status and their issues are irrelevant for the rest of the population. This seems to be confirmed by a theoretical position that sharply differentiates between the experiences of men and women in life. While the biological differences cannot be denied, other differences are social – women are socialised, not born into them (attempts by "biosociologists" to prove the biological bases of social differences are rather pathetic!). Yet some schools of feminist thinking (at least the way they are presented by Lichun Chiang) appear to regard all the differences in people's experience of life as immutable. The heart of the matter lies elsewhere, however, viz. in the fact that men's issues are considered general issues concerning the whole population. Or vice versa: that men represent issues of general interest, while women do not.

This calls for comment: until fairly recently, health and family affairs were considered to be women's issues in Germany, and the respective ministries were almost exclusively assigned to women (this never applied to education, however, although it did in East Asia). In the wake of globalisation and increasing deficits in social and health funding, problems of ghetto-

1 In his inimitable way with words, the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder once called these issues "Gedöns" ("all that fuss").

isation and juvenile delinquency, these issues gained importance far beyond the female niche – so much so that the Minister for Health in Germany is now a man. Again, a pattern is visible here: once a topic or a job has been taken out of the feminine realm and become "relevant", men usurp it (midwifery, obstetrics and healing are well-known examples of this). The reverse also happens: once formerly male jobs like secretaries, translators, teachers and medical occupations (in Russia) become female domains, they rapidly lose their prestige. In short, the prestige associated with a job is nothing to do with the job itself, but depends on which gender it is assigned to at different periods of time and what the *economic and financial* implications are that it has.

In East Asia, in particular, it seems to be considered praiseworthy for women to stick to feminine issues in politics because foreign policy and defence do not concern them or they are not interested in these fields. Yet what can concern a woman more than a son who possibly has to go to war because of her country's defence policy? What can concern her more than foreign and economic policies of her country that have an impact on her social and economic standing? Women in Sri Lanka should be able to confirm this; women's issues have become general ones with a vengeance, and those considered to be male or general issues concern women directly. Lichun Chiang and Wong-Hon Kim do not seem to take these considerations into account, while Jude Howell and Trudy Jacobsen are quite aware of them. Jacobsen outlines increasing efforts to push women back into an underprivileged, private sphere after they have helped to overcome the depredations of war and totalitarianism. Her description of the internalisation of 19th-century Victorian values that are totally contradictory to the previous cultural status of women in order to fight the "Westernisation" of Cambodian women is particular remarkable (and saddening).

Anula Attanayake's discussion of women in politics in Sri Lanka unfortunately remains at the level of generalities and banalities, profuse statistics notwithstanding. She harps on about the well-known fact that politics in Sri Lanka is a preserve of the elite (with the great unwashed hammering at the gates quite fiercely in the shape of the JVP) and about the consistently low percentage of women in Parliament despite their high rate of education. This information is not startlingly new, however. The insight that Sri Lanka achieved democracy without a culture of democracy is a useful one, but does not pertain to women alone. The author's discussion of welfare politics is a bit more interesting as it shows that welfare is conducted by others *for* the poor, not *by* the poor themselves, and that women's organisations try to offset the economic consequences of globalisation by means of welfare measures instead of questioning labour and economic policies. This is simi-

lar to what Howell reports about China where sacked women are retrained to do other work instead of questioning employment policy and the tendency to sack women first. It is remarkable that Attanayake manages to write a whole article on women's political participation and their role in Sri Lanka without mentioning the civil war, which had a massive impact on the situation and standing of women!

The volume is commendable not so much for its empirical findings, which are very useful in their own right, but for the questions and theoretical conundrums it throws up. It is a must for anybody who wants to know more about the situation of women in Asia.

The reviewer's reservations about publications in English that are not vetted by native speakers are vindicated by the current volume. Two incidences which, while not being catastrophic, are at least amusing, should not be kept from the reader: on p. 10, the author hopes that agendas in politics might change, "when *ample* women are in public office". Much as this delights the reviewer (who is herself somewhat ample), she is convinced that less ample – and even slender – women would be just as capable of effecting change as ample ones! And on p. 36 it is stated that some contexts "enable [...] female descendants and other *familiars* [...] to inherit the charisma of the deceased". Again, much as one hopes that women inherit this charisma, one would probably not wish it to go to a spirit, a ghost, or, indeed, a cat!

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