



The Legacy of 1945 for Equality and Women's Leadership in Asia

By Gwen Young

Much of Asia's progress in advancing women's rights came immediately after Pacific War. Partly as a result of the many wartime contributions and roles that women played in the war, the international institutions that grew out of the wartime experience served to incorporate new rights for women across the region. However, this momentum has stalled in recent years and needs a new injection of momentum for further improvements.

Many have predicted that the 21st century will be the "Asian Century," an era marked by the spread of Asian politics and culture. Productivity, investment,

technology, and innovation have driven economic growth across Asia and shifting demographics have accelerated this trend as the [working age population is growing at a rate slightly higher than the global average](#). Since the end of World War II, Asian countries have nearly eradicated poverty, improved public health and education systems, and expanded employment opportunities, services, and resources for millions of citizens.

Currently, women serve as the heads of government or state of Singapore, New Zealand, Taiwan, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bangladesh, with the Asia-Pacific holding [over 30 percent of the current](#)

[female heads of state or government](#). Since 1946, 19 of the 98 women (almost 20 percent) elected or appointed as heads of state or government have been in the Asia-Pacific. Increasing leadership accompanies a rise of women in the workforce, falling maternal mortality rates, and a rise of movements across Asia calling for gender equality.

At the same time, economic growth and democratization in Asia has been uneven geographically as well as for women. According to the World Bank, 59 percent of women in East Asia and the Pacific are in the workforce, compared to 23.4 percent of women in South Asia and 47.1 percent globally. Meanwhile, according to the [World Economic Forum Gender Gap report](#), East Asia and the Pacific ranks between Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of overall gender equity performance.

How Did We Get Here?

The end of the Pacific War signaled not only the end of a long war, but also the beginning of independence and anti-colonial movements across Asia. The status of women varied across the region at the end of the war, and the recruitment of women and girls as sex slaves for the Japanese military—termed “comfort women”—was a powerful reminder of the violence and exploitation that women could be subject to. Overall, women had very few rights and patrilineal structures remained prominent in many countries.

The war experience is replete with crucial contributions from women across all fronts, particularly in the Pacific Theater. On the home front and across the region, women worked as a part of auxiliary forces, as nurses, in the clerical and service sectors, and in armaments factories and other vital industries as men left their jobs to enter the military. This wartime necessity opened up new opportunities in traditionally

male-dominated heavy industry. Even in the Axis powers, such as Japan, women increasingly worked in wartime industries as the economy strained under the pressure of the war.

There are also examples of Asian women in positions of influence during World War II. In China, [the three Soong sisters](#) played influential leadership roles, both in the then-ruling Nationalists and in the opposing Chinese Communist Party. For example, Soong Mei-ling, the wife of Chinese President Chiang Kai-shek, served as a key negotiator and translator in the Republic of China’s discussion with the Allies at the 1943 Cairo Conference. In the lead up to America’s entrance into the conflict, she proved instrumental in garnering U.S. material support for the embattled Republic of China prior to 1941. Her older sister, Soong Ching-ling supported the Communists and would later achieve prominent political positions in the People’s Republic of China where Chairman Mao had declared that “[women hold up half the sky](#).”

By the end of the war, the participation of women in the war effort set the stage to consider gender equality and the rights of women as economic and political actors. Largely driven by the United States, the post-war period witnessed a rise in multilateral and international institutions, most notably the United Nations, intended to support liberal values, of which women’s rights received prominent emphasis. The UN Charter mandated “equal rights for men and women.” Further gender equality was endorsed in multiple post-war international conventions and global agreements, including the *Convention on the Political Rights of Women* (1953), the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966), and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979). Women’s equality and equal political participation was affirmed as a right



and global priority almost 35 years ago in the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995). The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, calls for women’s “full and effective participation” in all arenas of public decision-making.

Countries across Asia also began to include gender equality or nondiscrimination clauses in their constitutions and enact affirmative measures for women in politics., [Beate Sirota Gordon](#), for instance, was instrumental to ensure women’s rights into Japan’s new constitution. Her work ensured that the new constitution [called for gender equality and non-discrimination – rights that were notably not included in the U.S. Constitution](#). The Philippine constitution also acquired an equality provision and China, India, Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Taiwan all have equality for women and men, as well as non-discrimination clauses on the basis of sex, in their constitutions.

Ongoing Efforts to Continue the Post-War Gains

These constitutional clauses are important, but in order for constitutions to ensure equal and effective access to justice for women, more than a general equality guarantee is required. Countries need to have both legislation and the enforcement of such legislation to ensure that gender equality is realized. One tool is a quota or affirmative measure in the form of either legislative, constitutional, or job quotas.

In terms of demonstrating a commitment to increasing the number of women in politics, East Timor, South Korea and Indonesia have enacted [legislative quotas](#), with a few countries enacting a reserved seat quota and countries like Thailand,

Sri Lanka, China, and the Philippines instituting other various quotas. East Timor has the highest percentage at 38 percent while most countries hover around 19.7 percent at the parliamentary level.

Calls for gender equality in the private sector began in the 1970s and 80s. In 1985, Japan ratified CEDAW and this led to significant changes in Japanese law, starting in 1997 with the amendment to the Law for Equal Employment Opportunity of Men and Women. Vietnam has shown a commitment to increase women’s rights, equity, and representation in the work force. This included the creation of job quotas during the 1960s, which required that women occupy a certain percentage of jobs in different sectors. Women’s rights have continued to increase in Vietnam, and women have increasingly held leadership positions. Vietnam has one of the [highest female labor-force participation rates in the world](#) and ranked second among Asian countries in terms of women in senior management positions.

It is important to note that, while slow, the progress towards gender equality in leadership is moving across the region and South East Asian countries have banded together to focus on gender quality. ASEAN was established in 1967 and its Political Security Community aims to promote political development adhering to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and good governance, respect for and promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as inscribed in the ASEAN Charter. In 2013, the Secretary-General of ASEAN, Le Luong Minh, declared in his opening remarks at a Gender Mainstreaming Training Session launched by the ASEAN Secretariat in 2013 that [‘the spirit of promoting gender equality should be an integrated](#)



[part of ASEAN's policies and programs towards the ASEAN Community. The goal of gender equality should be central to all three pillars of economy, political-security and socio-cultural of ASEAN.](#) Furthermore, the Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review in 2019 was adopted after intense negotiations at a three-day Ministerial Conference organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. More recently, women's empowerment played a role at [the G20 summit of 2019 held in Tokyo.](#)

Women in Asia in 2020

In 2020, the growing prominence of women in the political, economic and social spheres across the region reflects growing calls for equity. Although significant progress remains to be had, the gains that began with World War II have continued into the present day as women mobilize to ensure further progress and equal rights throughout Asia in politics, economics, and society.

- **Women in the Political Sphere**

On the one hand, Asia has proven a hopeful front for women holding national political office. Currently, New Zealand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Singapore have a female head of state or government. As for Taiwan, it reelected its first female president, [Tsai Ing-Wen](#), to her second term earlier this year, and its representative body includes [43 women](#) (38 percent of seats).

At the same time, despite having elected or appointed a large number of leaders, heads of state or government, Asia lags in overall political participation and is on par with the Middle East and North Africa. According to the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), the global average for

women in parliament is 24 percent, while in Asia it's only 19.7 percent. This figure drops to 6.9 percent if Australia and New Zealand are removed. Till last year, women held about 21 percent of elected positions in local governments and 14.5 percent in the lower house of Parliaments. In fact, the past 18 years have shown little improvement according to [PEW](#). This figure is important, as Asia is home to [59.76 percent of the worlds' population—1.13 billion women, the most of any region.](#)

Further, according to the [World Economic Forum Gender Gap report](#), East and Southeast Asia are marked by a greater discrepancy between women's political rights and their social rights than in any other part of the world. Only four of the region's 20 countries studied have a score above 20 percent, including New Zealand (47.4 percent, 13th globally), while four countries from the region rank among the worst 10 performers, including Japan (4.9 percent, 144th) and Brunei Darussalam (3.1 percent, 148th), while Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu rank last in the world, with a score of 0. This means that, in either country, there has never been a female head of state in the past 50 years, and there is currently no women in parliament or in ministerial positions.

- **Women in the Economic Sphere**

Gender equality in work varies widely across the region, with industrialized countries such as Japan and South Korea representing some of the lowest measures of equality and the Philippines performing the best. According to work done by the McKinsey Global Institute, while a greater percentage of women than men work in technical and professional occupations in China, the Philippines, and Thailand, the region reflects low levels of women in private sector leadership positions. Women's participation



in paid work has risen in Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Korea, while rates have fallen in China, Thailand, and Myanmar. In countries with rising levels of women's workforce participation, gains are due in part to policies designed to offset gendered roles, including improvements to parental leave mandates,

These variations in workplace equality across Asian countries are compounded by regional disparities of opportunity within countries and challenge the effectiveness of country-level policies aimed at improving equality of outcomes. Moreover, according to McKinsey, 1 in 10 leaders across Asia are women and in China women comprise [only 9.7 percent of top management](#).

There are initiatives across the region aimed at improving women's participation in the work force. One such initiative is the Japan ASEAN Women's Empowerment Fund. This was established in 2016 by Japanese aid agencies and Blue Orchard, a commercial microfinance intermediary, to invest US\$120 million in female micro-entrepreneurs. Similarly, the Women's Livelihood Bond was developed by a Singapore-based company, Impact Investment Exchange, and is guaranteed by USAID and DFAT. This four-year bond offers a coupon rate of 5.65 percent, and was listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange in August 2017. It is advertised as impacting the lives of over 385,000 women across South-East Asia through microfinance programs in Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Finally Japan did start an [international conference](#) about women's rights and economic and social advancement.

- **Women in the Social Sphere**

As discussed, there are international, regional and national laws calling for women's equality and leadership, and according to many studies,

widespread support for the idea that men and women have equal rights. And yet, as shown above, women are still not rising to leadership positions at the same rate as men. This is due in part to structural barriers such as lack of access to finance, women's time burden with respect to domestic work and unpaid care, and also perceptions.

Recent studies and trends show that perceptions, and thus societal beliefs, have not kept up with laws, legislation, and structural instruments. Across Asia, while calling for women's leadership is done in principal, women are not seen to have the attributes of leadership. According to a study by [International Women's Development Agency](#) with Women's Action for Voice and Empowerment leadership traits including hard working, ambitious and confidence are attributed to men rather than women. Women are seen as honest and humble, and not necessarily as confident leaders and more suited to issues of social welfare than men. Further, social norms emphasizing women's domestic and caring roles and positioning these as a priority over public roles are evident, and suggest that gender norms are an obstacle to gender equality and women's leadership. The key then is to change social perceptions and gender norms of men and women.

Conclusion

Since the end of the War, the progress that has been made for the rights of women has been substantial. These achievements – though incomplete - were put in place after the end of World War II in the Pacific theater and the United States was instrumental in introducing policies of gender equity in the region and in international institutions. Women's participation in the war paved the way for the liberalizing post-war period and fostered significant gains in women's rights.



This movement continued to build on the initial gains throughout the second half of the 20th century. Asia has continued to build on that legacy, and female empowerment has been critical in driving productivity, investment, technology, and innovation across the region. Women can help—and are helping—to power this engine, making vital contributions to sustaining and enhancing Asia’s growth and lifting more people out of poverty.

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