

Book review: Devin K. Joshi, Christian Echle (eds): Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments

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of BRICS+ that are not traditionally in the Afrasian space react to this proposed Afrasian realignment? How will the United Nations ensure that this Afrasian behemoth is well-represented in the global body?

Whatever the case, the call for a pan-Afrasian consciousness is one of the most important contributions of this book, which belongs on the shelves of all scholars of the humanities and social sciences.

Adams Bodomo

DEVIN K. JOSHI / CHRISTIAN ECHLE (EDS), *Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments*. London: Routledge, 2022. 294 pages, \$44.95. ISBN 978-1-0322-3146-4 (pb)

Asia is home to a wide range of political systems; unconsolidated democracies, hybrid governance systems, as well as systems marked by repeated cycles of political transitions shifting from democratic liberalisation to military coups and backsliding to authoritarianism. In this diversity of political contexts across Asia, women hold top political leadership positions as prime ministers or presidents and are active in major political parties or opposition movements. Women politicians thus play a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape of the region. Over the years, many Asian countries have made significant progress in increasing the representation of women in politics, although challenges persist. The share of women in parliament is in a dismal state in Asia, which ranks fifth out of six regions worldwide, having grown only from 13.2 percent in 1995 to 20.7 percent in 2021 amid significant intraregional differences (IPU, 2022). However, scholars have not paid enough attention to the gender disparities in political engagement in Asian countries.

Devin K. Joshi and Christian Echle's edited volume, *Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments*, is an enlightening and comprehensive book. This is primarily a collection of qualitative research, in which each researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the progress, challenges and prospects for women's substantive representation in the political landscapes of Asian countries. The book provides a broad insight into the experiences of women parliamentarians from ten Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka). By examining case studies from these diverse and contrasting Asian contexts, the authors offer a nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics that shape the substantive representation of women (SRW) in Asian parliaments.

It is noteworthy that all of the authors are female and nine out of the ten are local, experienced researchers with "deep contextual knowledge of the specific

country's political environment" (p. 10). The book's most notable feature is that all the case studies follow a similar research design and structure. Each chapter begins with a discussion of political and cultural contexts, followed by descriptions of the individuals surveyed for the study and an examination of how personal experiences and ideologies have an impact on women's substantive representation (p. 9).

The book starts with Joshi's description of women's political representation in Asian countries by providing a contextual framework that delves into the socio-cultural, economic and political factors that impact women's political representation in Asia. The author adeptly highlights the historical legacies, traditional gender roles and institutional structures that often hinder women's access to decision-making positions. By doing so, Devin Joshi sets the stage for a critical examination of the strategies and mechanisms employed to promote gender equality in Asian parliaments, explaining in detail those factors that play a significant role in improving women's substantive representation. In his opinion, the greater challenge appears to be the heterogeneity of Asia (p. 5).

This book has several chapters that demonstrate its status as a landmark contribution to the discipline. For examples, the chapters "Substantive Representation of Women in Japan: Gender Equality in a Gender-Insensitive Parliament" (Chapter 2 by Mikiki Eto) and "Substantive Representation of Women in Malaysian Legislatures: Parliament (Dewan Rakyat) and State Assemblies" (Chapter 6 by Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan) can be considered as the first country case studies to examine SRW in the context of parliamentary committees. Each country-specific chapter presents the reader with a novel and insightful analysis of the political and institutional factors that facilitate or impede efforts to advance gender equality. For example, it is argued in the chapter on Timor-Leste that "working for gender equality is very dependent on a parliamentarian's personal values, understanding of gender relationships and the dimensions of gender inequality, as well as power relations within her own political party and the values of that party" (p.179).

In Chapter 10, titled, "Substantive Representation of Women Parliamentarians and Gender Equality in Nepal"; it is contended that a "lack of diversity among parliamentarians is still ultimately one of the major problems faced by the Parliament of Nepal" (p. 223). Every case study presents diverse obstacles, include social attitudes (Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Indonesia); "a lack of discussions of women issues in parliament, a lack of educational infrastructure, a patriarchal society with outdated social norms and customs, gender-based discrimination; bureaucratic complexity" (Bangladesh); "party leaders, government, the lack of trust in women, party policies" (Nepal); "racist, vulgar and sexist remarks in parliament, had limited time for debate (Malaysia); a lack of gender awareness, a political culture of male dominance" (Japan) (p. 259). Many Asian women parliamentarians believe that to promote substantive representation of women and gender equality, it is crucial to "change social attitudes" and "make neces-

sary structural and institutional changes to the government and the economy” (p. 260).

Electoral politics and various quota systems are also topics that are covered in this book. Asian countries have implemented a variety of gender quotas in order to improve women’s representation but “there has been backlash and sometimes disappointment with the immediate results” (p. 7). Contributing authors have critically evaluated the effectiveness of various gender quota systems in encouraging women to become involved in political processes. In the chapter on Nepal, Aashiyana Adhikari insightfully observes, “It is shameful to provide spaces for women solely for the sake of a constitutional provision while doing nothing to address misogynistic behaviour against them and their removal from key decision making processes” (p. 219).

Intersectionality is a vital theoretical and analytical framework for understanding and addressing the complex and varied challenges faced by women in politics and it is stimulating to see that intersectionality has been included as an important cross-cutting component in the comparative study of women’s substantive representation in Asia. In the introduction, Devin Joshi writes that “when it comes to SRW, intersectionality matters not only because of the heterogeneity among women but also because women from the disadvantaged population may incur greater hardship” (p. 10). This book takes a novel approach to studying the relationship between intersectionality and women’s representation. The concept of intersectionality applied here strongly emphasises the interaction between gender and other social identities, including race, class, ethnicity and religion (p. 10), as contributing authors explicitly investigate how these intersecting identities influence women’s political experiences and define the opportunities and obstacles they face. It is evident from most case studies that the majority of MPs come from privileged class backgrounds (see for example pp. 64, 154, and 175). An interesting observation was made in the case of Nepal, where “women who come from [...] unprivileged backgrounds work more on equality than any other stratum in the society” (p. 221).

Another captivating topic of this edited volume is an investigation into the impact that parliamentary committees have had on the substantive representation of women. This research investigates the question of whether or not the presence of women in positions of authority results in distinct legislative goals or transformative changes in areas such as gender equality, social welfare and human rights. The book provides support for the significance of critical mass theory, because it is obvious that when women comprise close to 40 per cent of committee members, they manage to promote gender equality; however, when they make up less than 17.5 per cent, the contrary is the case (p. 254).

In addition to this, the book also analyses the challenges that women face when attempting to navigate political parties and the electoral process and provides a thorough understanding of the myriad obstacles that women politicians in Asia confront today. It explores the institutional and structural factors that

sustain gender inequalities, including patriarchal norms, political party dynamics, bullying and harassment, as well as the electoral systems. Another major problem in the Asian political system is the prevalence of bullying and harassment. Forty-four percent of the MPs who took part in this study are reported to have “experienced (or witnessed) some form of bullying, harassment, or gender stereotyping in Parliament” (p. 255).

Devin K. Joshi and Christian Echle’s edited book *Substantive Representation of Women in Asian Parliaments* will generate more interest in the study of such an important topic, and it will also stimulate academics to produce more scholarly work on the subject. Joshi’s argument looks convincing: “Studying SRW by Asian MPs helps us to uncover what exactly parliamentarians do to improve gender equality by focusing on a region that has been largely overlooked by most previous scholarship on SRW” (p. 6). The edited volume’s exploration of gender and politics from multiple angles yields useful information about what must be done to make real progress toward gender equality in the legislatures of the Asian region. It serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, activists and anyone interested in understanding the intricacies of women’s political empowerment and its transformative potential in Asian societies.

One of the book’s notable strengths lies in its use of in-depth case studies from diverse Asian countries. By providing detailed analyses of women’s experiences in parliaments across the region, the authors shed light on the unique challenges faced by women from different cultural backgrounds and political contexts. The case studies reveal how intersectionality plays a pivotal role in shaping women’s political journeys and how addressing multiple dimensions of discrimination is essential for achieving true gender equality. The book makes a compelling case for the inclusion of women from marginalised groups and advocates for an inclusive feminist agenda in politics.

Even though this is a fascinating book, a few dimensions could have been added to make it even more in-depth and powerful. A bigger sample size would have been more compelling for the study of women’s representation in such diverse political contexts in Asia. There are 300 members (p. 12) in the South Korean parliament, but only nine legislators were interviewed for this study. In the same vein, just eight Indonesian parliamentarians were interviewed out of a total of 500 (p. 12). Women’s representation in national cabinets is a crucial step toward building more inclusive, equitable and effective governance systems, and an examination of this factor would have added substance and breadth to the discussion. It would also have been more enticing for readers interested in greater research results if Pakistan and India, two of the largest nations in South Asia, had been included in the book.

Sher Muhammad