

# Breaking Glass Ceilings In Mongolia And Southeast Asia: A Comparative Analysis Of Female Representation In Cabinet Positions And The Strategies For Future Advancement

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## Abstract:

This study examines the representation of women in cabinet positions in Southeast Asia, with a focus on the progress made and the challenges that remain in achieving parity with Western countries. Despite significant strides in recent years, women continue to be underrepresented in senior cabinet positions, particularly in portfolios related to defence and security. Through a comparative analysis of datasets of four nations including Mongolia, this research identifies the factors that have contributed to the increase in female representation and highlights the gaps that persist. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in key decision-making positions, such as prime ministers and defence ministers. According to the “Women’s Power Index” by the Council on Foreign Relations 2024, out of 193 countries cited, 25 % have a female head of state or government with fifty percent holding both cabinet and national legislature posts. In Asia specifically, within the southeast region of the continent, there has been a vast improvement in female representation in government cabinet posts, however, this study will illustrate that compared to the West.

**Keywords:** Gender stereotypes and discrimination, cabinet portfolios, revised legislation

## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Description
ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations.
CEDAW:	Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women.
WEF:	The World Economic Forum.
WFD:	Westminster Foundation for Democracy.
UNFPA:	United Nations Population Fund.
Laos LRP:	Lao People's Revolutionary Party

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing trend of increased female representation in government cabinet posts in Southeast Asia. This shift has significant implications for gender movements in the region. This

response will examine the current state of female representation in government cabinet posts in Southeast Asia and its impact on gender movements.

The underrepresentation of women in cabinet positions is a persistent issue in many countries, despite the growing recognition of the importance of gender equality in governance. This phenomenon is not only a matter of social justice but also has significant implications for the effectiveness and responsiveness of governments. As women's participation in the political sphere continues to evolve, it is essential to examine the current state of female representation in cabinet positions and identify strategies for future advancement, as women continue to be underrepresented in representative political institutions across Southeast Asia, particularly at the municipal level. While not unique in this regard, the limited extent of improvements in Southeast Asian women's representation in local political institutions contrasts with the widespread perception that women in Southeast Asia have made significant gains in their socioeconomic status as well as the extent and exercise of their formal political rights. Indeed, while the scholarly literature indicates a growing interest in women's political participation in Southeast Asia, our understanding of women's experiences in pursuing elected office, as well as the variables that affect the patterns and consequences of these experiences, is limited. (Choi, N. 2018).

This research study aims to provide a comparative analysis of female representation in cabinet positions across different countries, exploring the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in these roles. The study will investigate the current trends and patterns of female representation in cabinet positions, examining the impact of political, social, and economic factors on women's participation in governance. Furthermore, the paper will discuss the implications of female underrepresentation in cabinet positions, including the potential consequences for policy-making, governance, and societal development. This is illustrated clearly within this year's UN Women Report's data (2024abc).

The research will also explore strategies for increasing female representation in cabinet positions, including the implementation of gender quotas, mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives. The study will examine the effectiveness of these strategies in promoting gender equality in governance and identify best practices for future implementation. As mentioned in a 2016 report - given that democracy can no longer afford to disregard women's competence, abilities, and creativity, however, must become gender aware and incorporate women from various backgrounds and age groups in political and public decision making at all levels; Mindful of the high priority the Council of Europe gives to the promotion of democracy and human rights, which recommends that the governments of member states: commit themselves to promote balanced representation of women and men by recognising publicly that the equal sharing of decision-making power between women and men of different backgrounds and ages strengthens and enriches democracy; to protect and promote the equal civil and political rights of women and men. In addition to ensure that women and men can exercise their individual voting rights and, to that end, take all of the necessary measures to eliminate the practice of family voting; to review their legislation and practice, with the aim of ensuring that the strategies and measures described in this recommendation are applied and implemented; to promote and encourage special measures to stimulate and support women's will to participate in political and public decision making. (Council of Europe, 2016).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to the advancement of gender equality in governance, promoting a more inclusive and representative political sphere. By examining the current state of female representation in cabinet positions and identifying strategies for future advancement, this meticulous body of work aims to inform policymakers, scholars, and practitioners on the importance of promoting gender equality in governance and provide recommendations for increasing female participation in cabinet positions.

#### ***Research Questions:***

- What are the current trends and patterns of female representation in cabinet positions across different countries?
- What factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in cabinet positions?
- What are the implications of female underrepresentation in cabinet positions for policy-making, governance, and societal development?

- What strategies can be implemented to increase female representation in cabinet positions, and what are the best practices for future implementation?

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The research involved a comparative analysis of female representation in cabinet positions across certain Asian countries, using data from reputable sources such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the World Bank, and the United Nations. The study also included in-depth interviews with female cabinet members, policymakers, and experts in the field of gender and governance within Mongolia and data collated from neighbouring regions.

### *Expected Outcomes:*

This research aims to contribute to the advancement of gender equality in governance by providing a comprehensive analysis of female representation in cabinet positions and identifying strategies for future advancement. The study's findings are expected to inform policymakers, scholars, and practitioners on the importance of promoting gender equality in governance and provide recommendations for increasing female participation in cabinet positions. Ultimately, this research aims to promote a more inclusive and representative political sphere, where women have equal opportunities to participate in governance and contribute to the development of their countries.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet positions is a persistent issue in Southeast Asia, despite the region's rapid economic growth and social progress. This literature review critically examines existing research on the topic, highlighting the gaps and limitations that the current study aims to address.

*Existing Research:* Numerous studies have investigated the factors contributing to the low representation of women in cabinet positions in Southeast Asia. Research has shown that cultural and societal norms, such as patriarchal values and gender stereotypes, play a significant role in limiting women's access to leadership positions (Tabassum & Nayak 2021).

Additionally, studies have identified institutional barriers, including lack of quotas, inadequate training and mentorship programs, and limited access to resources and networks. (Chen, 2019; Nguyen, 2020).

*Comparative studies:* have also highlighted the disparities in female representation in cabinet positions between Southeast Asia and Western countries. For instance, a study by the World Economic Forum (2020) found that the average percentage of female cabinet ministers in Southeast Asia was 12.6%, compared to 24.4% in Western Europe and 21.4% in North America.

### *Gaps and Limitations:*

Despite the existing research, several gaps and limitations remain:

*Lack of comprehensive data:* Many studies rely on limited data sources, such as government reports or surveys, which may not provide a comprehensive picture of the issue.

*Insufficient attention to intersectionality:* Research has largely focused on the experiences of women in general, without considering the intersecting factors of ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status that may affect their access to cabinet positions.

*Limited analysis of policy interventions:* Few studies have examined the effectiveness of policies aimed at increasing female representation in cabinet positions, such as quotas, training programs, and mentorship initiatives.

*Neglect of the role of men:* The literature has largely overlooked the role of men in perpetuating or challenging gender inequalities in cabinet positions.

### *Current Study:*

This study aims to address these gaps and limitations by:

- Conducting a comprehensive analysis of data:* The study will utilize a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from government reports and surveys with qualitative data from in-depth interviews with female cabinet ministers and policymakers.

- b) *Examining intersectionality*: The study will investigate how intersecting factors, such as ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, affect women's access to cabinet positions.
- c) *Evaluating policy interventions*: The study will assess the effectiveness of existing policies aimed at increasing female representation in cabinet positions and propose new policy recommendations.
- d) *Exploring the role of men*: The study will examine the attitudes and behaviours of male policymakers and their impact on gender equality in cabinet positions.
- e) *Policy Recommendations*: Based on the literature review, this study proposes a set of policies for Southeast Asian governments to incentivize more women to acquire senior cabinet positions i.e., quotas and targeting variables.

#### **4. Increased Female Representation in Government Cabinet Posts in Southeast Asia 2024 and Its Impact on Gender Movements**

Referring to the representation statistics published, according to a UN Women's report, the share of female Cabinet ministers in Central and South Asia is 9.5%, which is the lowest ranked region. However, in Southeast Asia, women's representation in parliament has increased over the past two decades, with 13% of seats in national parliaments held by women. Despite this progress, women remain under-represented in certain representative political institutions, particularly at local levels of governance.

##### ***Impact on Gender Movements***

Studies have shown that higher numbers of women in parliament generally contribute to stronger attention to women's issues. Increased female representation in government cabinet posts can lead to more gender-sensitive policies and decision-making. For instance, women in leadership positions can advocate for policies that address gender-based violence, promote gender equality, and support women's economic empowerment.

##### ***Examples of Increased Female Representation***

Several countries in Southeast Asia have made significant strides in increasing female representation in government cabinet posts. For example, in 2024, the percentage of female legislators globally was 26.9%, with some countries in Southeast Asia exceeding this average. Additionally, the 2024 elections saw a notable increase in female voter participation, indicating a growing interest in politics among women.

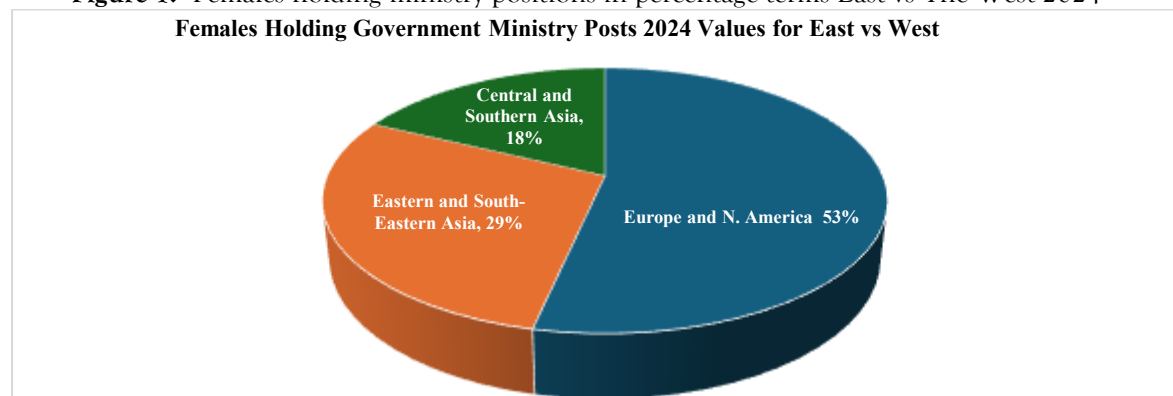
##### ***Challenges and Opportunities***

Despite the progress made, there are still significant challenges to overcome. Autocratic regimes can sometimes promote more women to leadership positions, but more research is needed to understand the implications of this trend. Moreover, women's political participation is increasing, but they remain under-represented in many areas of governance. In summarisation, increased female representation in government cabinet posts in Southeast Asia has the potential to significantly impact gender movements in the region. While there are still challenges to overcome, the growing trend of women in leadership positions is a positive step towards promoting gender equality and addressing women's issues. Further research and efforts are needed to support and sustain this progress.

#### **5. RESULTS**

##### ***How do regions and nations do in terms of gender parity?***

According to the World Economic Forum's 2024 datasets in terms of gender parity statistics, the results revealed that males continued to hold the majority of cabinet posts. Globally, 23.3% of cabinet members leading ministries were women, a slight rise of half a percentage point over the previous year. Women make up a larger proportion of the population in Europe and Northern Africa (32.5%), whereas Central and Southern Asia has the lowest proportion (9.5%). Only 15 nations have gender-parity cabinets, including ten in Europe, three in Latin America and the Caribbean, and two in Sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of nations (100) have between 10 and 30% women in cabinets. Worryingly, 31 nations (from all areas, but particularly Central and Southern Asia, Oceania, Western Africa, and Northern Africa) have fewer than 10% women. Specifically for the theme of this study geographically, pertaining to Asia, the East versus the West comparisons are illustrated in (Fig. 1). Below:

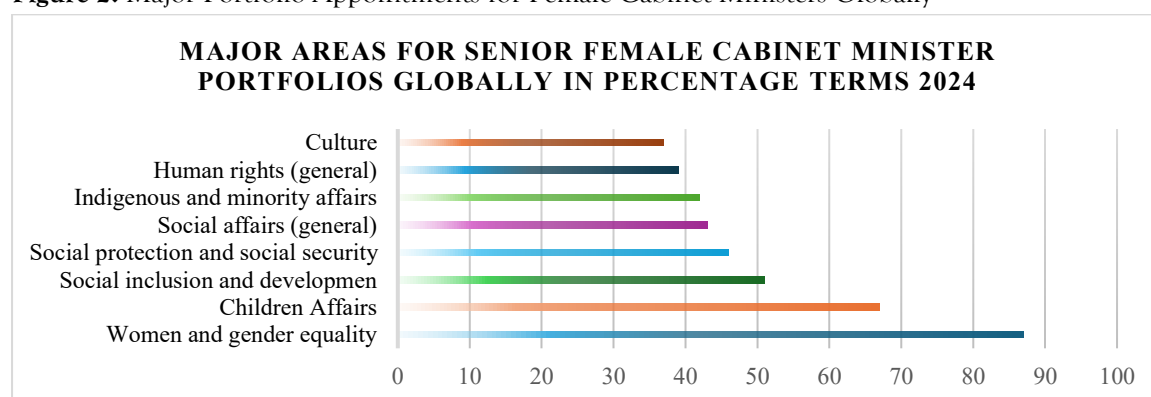
**Figure 1.** Females holding ministry positions in percentage terms East vs The West 2024

**Source:** World Economic Forum - Gender Parity Statistics. (1 January, 2024).

As it is relative in (Fig. 1) if we compare Europe and all of North America's values they are high at fifty-three percent compared to the values shown in (Fig. 4) due to there are two more continental illustrations added to this list being sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. The data also shows that nations who are predominantly Muslim countries located in Central and South Asia account for the 18% i.e., the lowest female cabinet participation region in leading government administrative roles. Therefore, for the research's targeted region Southeast Asia and Eastern Asia, they clearly indicate the improvement numbers with regard to women's senior government participation and their increased activities.

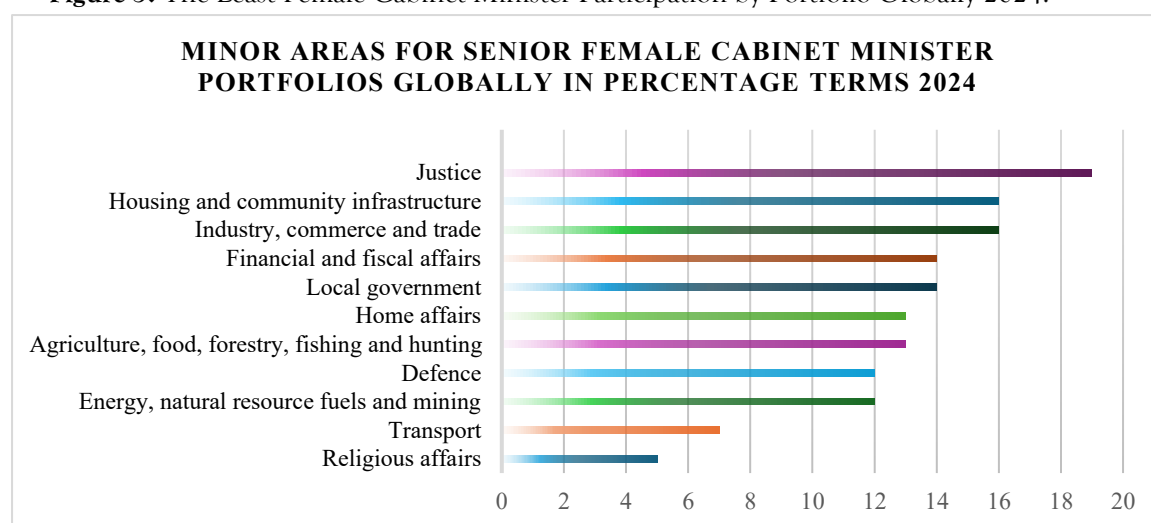
The measly annual growth in women's participation in cabinet seats shows that gender parity will take decades to achieve. Furthermore, significant work has to be done to promote equality beyond numerical representation. Women in ministry leadership are defining policy objectives for gender equality, family and children affairs, and social inclusion and development, but they are mostly absent from defense, justice and home affairs, and economic policy-making. This gender distribution of portfolios reflects discriminatory gender roles in many countries, but is most noticeable in Eastern and South-eastern Asia, Northern Asia and Northern Africa, and Central and Southern Asia. (WEF. 2024).

#### *Female Senior Cabinet Minister Posts - A World View*

**Figure 2.** Major Portfolio Appointments for Female Cabinet Ministers Globally

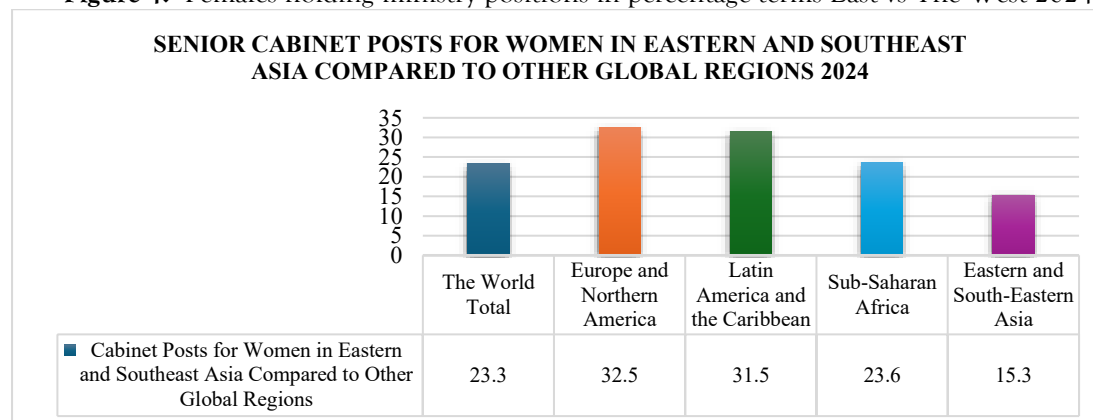
**Source:** UN Women, (2024a). WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERS 2024.

Continuing with the world overview, using the cinematic term typecasting for actors, it is clearly defined (Fig. 2) that the major female cabinet portfolios are similar globally. It appears that senior government positions in more notable roles are harder to acquire for women. The graphic clearly portrays that societal mandates or portfolios are clearly dominated by women. For example, from women's and gender equality to human rights issues are usually assigned to women inclusive of cultural ministries irrespective their educational background and/or respective track records. This is exemplified by the high eighty's percentages for women and children's affairs and dramatically cascades down to less than 40% for the more noted but critical portfolios, as clearly denoted in the graphic. (UN Women, 2024b).

**Figure 3.** The Least Female Cabinet Minister Participation by Portfolio Globally 2024.

**Source:** UN Women, (2024b). WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERS 2024.

Conversely, the minor areas (Fig. 3), in female cabinet representation for governments globally, can be viewed by the nature of conservative – traditional themed portfolios listed here. As we gaze upon the numerical values representing said ministries, it is obvious to denote that from religious affairs, trade and commerce, security and energy sector senior positions, are clearly held by the male majority. With Justice being at ~ 19% female representation, Industry 16%, anything relating to homes and food totalling a women's participation rates only at 29%. Therefore, the energy and defence areas of officialdom are commonly held by males at 88 percent. The graphic overall suggest more female participation in senior leadership roles covering this shortfall in representation, and more importantly, the selection process itself within government.

**Figure 4.** Females holding ministry positions in percentage terms East vs The West 2024

**Source:** UN Women, (2024c). Women Political Leaders 2024.

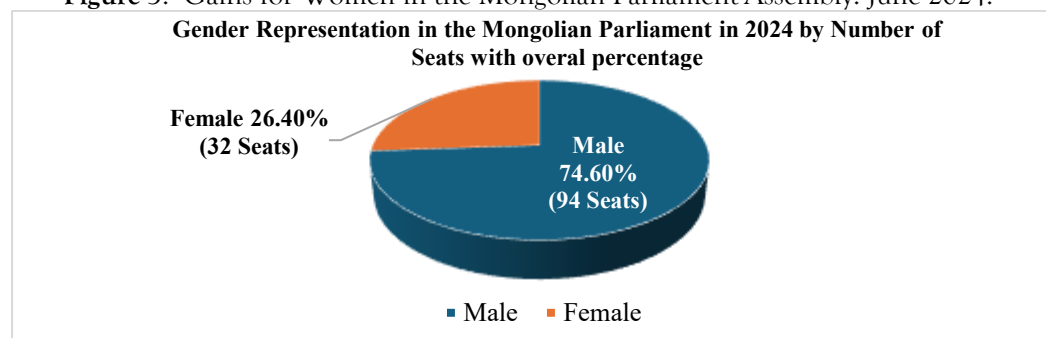
If we were to delve into the regions East versus West phenomenon within four combined areas, for this year, (Fig.4) North America, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean are leading the way of global women's cabinet representation with values of 32.5%, and 31.5% respectively, or 64% of the world total. The data also shows that our research region Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, accounts for the lowest values represented in this world comparative. (UN Women, 2024c).

#### ***Mongolia-Specific Data - Comparatives to other SE Nations.***

According to the article by International IDEA, Mongolia's electoral changes drastically altered the political scene, with a record number of women entering Parliament/Assembly (Grand Hural) This shift follows the May 2023 constitutional revision, which increased parliamentary seats from 76 to 126 and mandated a 30% candidate quota for women. As a consequence, the number of female MPs has risen drastically from 13 to 32. The elections on June 28, 2024, were the first under this new system, which introduced a parallel system in which 48 out of 126 seats were elected using proportional representation.

(Tamang, 2024). The 2024 election results inclusive of the increased representation of seats gained in the assembly by female candidates are clearly notated in (Fig 5).

**Figure 5.** Gains for Women in the Mongolian Parliament-Assembly. June 2024.



**Source:** International IDEA. (Tamang, 2024).

### *Women in who are in Mongolian Ministries and hold Cabinet Office Leadership Positions*

Prior to the 2024 Mongolian general elections women accounted for just 13 seats in the Parliament, while men held the remaining 63. Then the proportion of women parliamentarians in Mongolia (17%) was far behind the global average of 24%, and placed Mongolia 121<sup>st</sup> out of 193 countries in terms of the number of women in its parliament. (UNDP, 2023). According to International IDEA, following this 2024 election cycle, the female representation in parliament or “Grand Hural” has increased by 64.3% with seats increased by 40.6% under this new allocation legislation by the resizing of parliament members. Female representation is now slightly ahead of the global average and should increase Mongolia’s 121<sup>st</sup> place from 193 countries for women MPs in parliament index. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go for women to be at parity with men, as their numbers are at 94 seats which is seventy-four percent of all members now residing in the “Grand Hural” or National Assembly as clear seen in Figure 5.

### *Historical Perspective: Gender Insight for Mongolia and a Woman’s Battlefield.*

‘Generally, women mention almost the same possibilities as the men do,’ stated Munkhsoyol Baatarjav, who is an economist and was in election campaigns for the parliament in 2016. ‘Although, in practice, because of the social, economic and financial status of women, many factors work against women rising to the top levels of leadership in politics and business.’ Statistics show that the representation of women in leadership positions in Mongolia is particularly low. In the words of the United Nations, women occupy no more than 15% of the highest-ranking executive officers in the private domain. The share of women in the Parliament is as low as 17% along with two ministerial cabinet seats, in contrast, there were no women governors or state secretaries as of 2016. According to Peter Bitner in his 2018 report for the UNFPA, he mentioned that since Mongolia’s transition from Soviet-era socialism to democracy in the early 1990s, families in the countryside have been more likely to send their daughters to study or work in urban areas. Girls are seen as more expendable than boys, who are required to help with the intensive labour of herding. As a result, more than 60 percent of university students are female, which is reflected in the workforce. Mongolian women are generally higher-educated and more likely to be employed than men. Yet, despite this reverse gender gap, Mongolian women have struggled to attain leadership posts at the highest levels across most fields. This can be attributed to Mongolia’s traditional patriarchal norms. Old adages such as “she’s better than a bad man” or “her intelligence is short, but her hair is long” are reflections of a devaluing of women’s competencies outside of child-rearing and homemaking roles. (Bittner, P. 2018). According to Naomi Kitahara United Nations Population Fund Representative and Chair of the UN Theme Group on Gender in Mongolia. In order to face the aforementioned inequalities in Mongolia, she said that it could not be achieved by women alone. According to a recent interview in Mongolia’s capital city Ulaanbaatar, Female MP and Minister of the Cabinet and Foreign Affairs B. Battsetseg, she stated that Mongolia has become a proponent of gender issues and is working hard to achieve this. (Battsetseg, B. 2024). She confirmed that in addition, within the context of the Female Foreign Ministers’ Meeting’s proceedings held last year, it was discussed how the women ministers could resolve many countries’ problems caused by the “global transition” encompassing wars and pandemics

like covid-19 that changed international relations and disciplines' perspectives. Nowadays, there are currently 40 out of the 193 countries who have female foreign ministers, all of those are active politicians who have a say. In fact, the figure was over 20 several years ago when she served as a Deputy Minister. Ms. Battsetseg additionally mentioned that they were also intending to hold another international conference in Mongolia, in 2025, and were in the early phases of preparing the hosting of the Seventeenth Session of COP of the UNCCD in 2026.

***Senior Cabinet Appointments for Women S.E. Asia 2023-2024. Elections Permitting.***

**Table 1.** S.E. Asian Women's representation in both Parliament and Cabinet Roles 2023-2024.

Country	Parliament	Cabinet Posts
Mongolia	26.4%	(30% set by 2024 Election)
South Korea	19.1%	37%
Japan	10.3%	10%
Cambodia	13.6%	9%
Laos LPR	21.9%	22%
China	26.5%	11%
Thailand	18.8%	22%
Taiwan	41.6%	29%
Average ( $\mu$ ) SE. Asia	$\mu$ 22.2%	$\mu$ 17.5%

**Source:** (Tamang, 2019; Shumway Focus Taiwan, 2024; Statista, 2024; & World Bank Group, 2017)

As displayed in Table 1, Mongolia has currently just over 26% in parliament following the 2024 general election, however, its legislation is quickly reforming more than most Southeastern Asian nations. In fact, it proposes a female representation value of 30% in senior cabinet positions in the near future. In South Korea, the statistics show real growth, where 19.1% women are represented in its assembly, whereby its senior cabinet female leaders occupy nearly double the parliamentary values. In Japan (Known for its stoical traditional nature in gender roles) the values in this nation's list, is recorded at a meagre 10 percent. This is without surprise to the actual study's readings thus far. Cambodia is very similar to the Japanese variables inclusive of religious ethics and cultural standing. Nonetheless the values illustrate a reduced showing for senior-rolled positions within in the ministries. As for Laos LPR, their numbers show a consistency with diversity in the political sphere showing a mirrored female engagement of 22% in both columns. China itself seems to concur by permitting more of its women in assembly roles rather than their partaking in more senior ministerial undertakings. This could be a factor why it prefers as a nation that a legislative female "reserved status" (Table 2.) mandate, rather than having a full Candidate Quota. Thailand is a further nation showing diversity improvements. As it averages 20% in both columns, however, as another nation steeped in certain religious tradition, this could be a further factor that it has refused to adopt any form of female representative candidate quotas in its constitution until now. Finally, the Island of Taiwan is between a rock and a hard place geopolitically. The data and commentary over the years has had Western influence engaging with the country especially withing gender affairs, and on the other hand with China's influences with an internationally countenanced claim over the nation, with a huge percentile of the 41% in their assembly while having half of this number in higher cabinet responsible for critical portfolios.



Table 2. S.E. Asian nations that apply “Candidate Quotas” for female legislative participation

Country	“Candidate Quotas”
Mongolia	Applied
South Korea	Applied
Japan	None
Cambodia	None
Laos LPR	None
China	Reserved Status
Thailand	None
Taiwan	None

**Source:** Die Welt. Women in politics: How far has Asia come? (Sasipornkarn, 2024).

Referring to Table 2., it is evident that five of these predominantly Buddhist nations that they do not apply any quota systems relating to mandatory numbers of female participation in positions of high-government office. However, both parliamentary women’s involvement and actually becoming members of assemblies have dramatically improved in some of the listed nations. Inclusive of senior level posts in southeast Asia, as the data clearly show (Table. 1) that Mongolia, Laos LPR and Taiwan illustrate modernisation where female reform attributed is becoming the norm following a long process of lobbying for women’s rights over many election and legislator promotional cycles.

## 6. Factors that Contribute to the Underrepresentation of Women in Senior Cabinet Posts

The underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet posts is a complex issue that can be attributed to various factors. These factors can be broadly categorized into societal, organizational, and individual levels.

**Societal Factors:** Societal norms and biases play a significant role in shaping the underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet posts. (Thelma, C., & Ngulube, L. 2024). The prevalence of unconscious bias against women and sexual harassment in the workplace can also contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. (UNSW, 2022).

**Organizational Factors:** Organizational elements, such as the lack of opportunities for women to advance to senior leadership positions, can also contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet posts. (Nyoni, W.P., & Chen, He. 2019). The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within organizations can perpetuate the underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet posts. (Baird, M. 2023).

**Individual Factors:** Individual components, such as past experiences, cognitive bias, age, and individual differences, can also influence decision-making and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet posts. (Choquette, G. 2021). The lack of representation of women in senior cabinet posts can also be attributed to the lack of women in the pipeline for these positions. (Ferrell, T.A. 2023).

Overall, the underrepresentation of women in senior cabinet posts is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach to address. It is essential to consider the interplay between societal, organizational, and individual factors to develop effective strategies to promote gender equality in leadership positions.

## 7. Policy Interventions Recorded, on Female Encouragement for Government Senior Cabinet Ministries in Southeast Asia.

The research has determined that in Southeast Asia, women face numerous barriers in their pursuit of political leadership (WFD, 2024). To address this issue, governments and policymakers can implement certain interventions to encourage female participation in government senior ministries.

### *Policy Interventions agreed by this study:*

#### ***Increase Women's Representation in Decision-Making Positions:***

Set objectives for women's participation in high government posts, such as the 30% aim set by the Malaysian government in 2004 (ASEAN, 2015). Thus, implementing measures that will promote women's involvement in governance at all levels, from local to national and international.

#### ***Support Women's Engagement in Local Government:***

Encourage women's involvement in local government to drive policy change on the ground and improve women's overall political participation (UN Women, 2022).

#### ***Collaborate with Women's Rights Groups:***

Collaborate with women's rights organisations to reform and update legislative frameworks for violence against women (OECD, 2024).

#### ***Address the Gender Digital Divide:***

Integrate gender views into digital government strategies to close the gender digital divide, as demonstrated in Cambodia's Digital Government Policy 2022-2035 (UN Women, 2022).

#### ***Promote Women-to-Women Peer Support and Mentorship:***

Encourage women-to-women peer support and mentorship networks to build confidence frameworks and leadership acumen.

#### ***Engage with Young People:***

Engage with young people to raise awareness on gender equality, democracy, within human rights, (WFD, 2024).

#### ***Public Sector Intervention:***

Use public sector engagement to establish incentives, align measurements and objectives, adopt legislation and regulations, and offer supervision or oversight. (ASEAN, 2022).

### ***In summation***

Implementing these legislative reforms has the potential to improve female involvement in top government ministries in Southeast Asia. By addressing the challenges that women encounter in political leadership, governments and politicians may promote gender equality and enable women to take on leadership responsibilities.

## 8. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) *Increase support for women's political participation.* Governments and civil society organizations should provide training and resources to support women's political participation, particularly at local levels of governance.
- ii) *Promote gender-sensitive policies.* Governments should prioritize gender-sensitive policies and decision-making, considering the needs and perspectives of women and girls.
- iii) *Encourage research and monitoring.* Further research is needed to understand the impact of increased female representation in government cabinet posts on gender movements in Southeast Asia. Regular monitoring and evaluation of progress can help identify areas for improvement and support sustainable change.
- iv) *To address these disparities.* The study proposes a set of policy recommendations for Southern Asian governments to incentivize more women to acquire senior cabinet positions. These include:
  - *Quotas and targets:* Implementing quotas or targets for female representation in cabinet positions, similar to those adopted in some Western countries.
  - *Mentorship programs:* Establishing mentorship programs that pair experienced female politicians with aspiring women leaders to provide guidance and support.

- *Capacity building*: Providing training and capacity-building programs to enhance the skills and confidence of women in politics.
- *Media representation*: Promoting positive media representation of women in politics to challenge stereotypes and biases.
- *Family-friendly policies*: Implementing family-friendly policies, such as childcare support and flexible work arrangements, to enable women to balance work and family responsibilities.
- *Leadership development*: Investing in leadership development programs that focus on building the skills and competencies of women in politics.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The underrepresentation of women in Cabinet positions across Southeast Asia can be attributed to a complex interplay of socio-cultural, political, and institutional factors. Despite some progress in women's political participation, the barriers to achieving equitable representation in high-level government roles remain significant. A major contributor for the lower number of women in Cabinet posts, male leadership is viewed through a deeply entrenched socio-cultural prism. Across much of Southeast Asia, traditional views about sex and gender continue to shape the political landscape where leadership is equated with representing masculinity. This cultural bias, other than not accommodating them legitimately into the political arena; have an effect on how voters and even political parties see their eligibility to enter. (Lee & Park, 2018; Choi, 2018). In addition, the political sphere is dominated by male ties and networks, rendering women who are not linked to a family of influence less likely secure seats (Khan & Ara 2023; Lee & Jalalzai 2017). This is worsened by the dependence on political dynasties, which had female politicians entering politics via family connections and not performance-based channels, in short, the use of nepotism. (Wardani & Subekti, 2021).

Institutional barriers also play a significant role in limiting women's access to Cabinet positions. Many Southeast Asian countries lack gender quotas or other affirmative measures that could facilitate greater female representation in political leadership (Azizuddin, 2023). Although international frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) advocate for a minimum of 30% female representation in decision-making roles, compliance and implementation remain inconsistent across the region (Azizuddin, 2023). Additionally, the political systems in many Southeast Asian nations are characterized by clientelism and patronage, which often favour male candidates who have established networks and resources (Wardani & Subekti, 2021).

In addition, women have to deal with many obstacles when they pursue a pathway into political leadership. In political parties, women are often confronted with discrimination and bias as their extension to be nominated or progress within a party is limited (Choi, 2018). Additionally, the absence of mentors and networks has increased barriers for women to be equipped with skills as many female politicians enter politics without well-designed programs (Apriani & Zulfiani, 2020). The impression that women are less able to fulfill the duties of high-stake political office may also deter both individual women from running for these offices as well as parties from nominating them (Lee & Park, 2018; Apriani & Zulfiani, 2020). In summary, the under-representation of women in Southeast Asian Cabinets is a complex problem resulting from deeply rooted socio-cultural prejudices and stereotypes, institutional obstacles to gender equality, as well as political realities based on the region. Solving these problems will burn up energy only when gestures toward the leadership roles of women are supported by transformation of societal attitudes, effective policies and a climate for nurturing the political aspirations among half or nearly half (depending on national realities) domestic populations.

Finally, we must recall that both North America and Europe have had over 30 years of women's rights implementation experience, this has allowed the movements within the halls of government to germinate and flourish leading to over 50% combined-country involvement that has led to a higher rate of leading roles for women in more serious portfolios than in South, East and Southeastern Asia. As noted earlier in Table 2., the implementation of Gender-based cabinet quotas in Southeast Asia, is far from satisfactory in the modern era. Mongolia, therefore, is leading the way in both parliamentary/assembl0079 representation and the increasing of leading ministerial appointments.

## 10. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article. The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.

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