Changing Realities for Asian Women Leaders
By Hu Shuli

Asia is not without notable examples of women who have made it to the top in the political arena, but that does not mean the gap between male and female participation in politics is anywhere near being closed.

Hu Shuli, arguably China’s best known female journalist, reflects on the role of women in politics and what it will take to close that gap.

WOMEN HAVE PLAYED A pivotal role in the modern politics of many Asian countries, a fact that grabbed the world’s attention in 1986 when Corazon Aquino took office as the Philippines’ first female president. Another milestone was reached just recently with Yingluck Shinawatra’s election as Thailand’s first female prime minister.

Indeed, Asia has filled a hall of fame with the names of successful women in positions of power. Indira Gandhi was twice elected prime minister of India. Benazir Bhutto served as Pakistan’s prime minister for two terms. Megawati Sukarnoputri was elected president of Indonesia in 2001. And Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and world-renowned opposition leader in Burma, led that country’s National League for Democracy to an election victory in 1990, the results of which were ignored by the ruling military junta.

But it would be wrong to say that this list of political stars is an indicator of wide political participation among women in Asia. In fact, most of Asia’s top female leaders rose to power because of the influence of their families or marital ties. Suu Kyi’s father founded the modern Burmese army and negotiated the country’s independence. Megawati’s father was the first president of Indonesia. Benazir Bhutto was the eldest child of former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

The rise of Suu Kyi, Megawati, Bhutto, Aquino, Yingluck and many other modern female leaders in Asia is tied to loved ones who were attacked or even murdered by political opponents. Aung San was assassinated by rivals in 1947, while Aquino’s husband, Benigno Aquino Jr., was gunned down by assassins in 1983. Bhutto’s father was executed after he was overthrown by the military. Megawati’s father, Sukarno, was pushed out of office by his own generals. Yingluck’s brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, lost the premiership in a 2006 military coup. Thus, these women stepped onto the political stage and set their eyes on state leadership with a sense of responsibility, a touch of heritage and sometimes more than a tinge of victimhood. But they won public support for having vision and proving their ability to lead.

CHINA’S ROAD
It is also true that Asian countries without a woman at the top are not necessarily weak on female political participation. In China, after a lengthy revolution that created a political structure in 1949 that is very different from those found among its Asian neighbors, women’s access to politics, business or social affairs is not restricted. Moreover, this access for women is widening — a fact supported by the nation’s relatively inexpensive childcare system and broad educational opportunities.

But this easy access has evolved in different ways for Chinese women in the private and public spheres. Female business leaders have thrived in China in recent decades. The Hurun Report’s “List of Self-Made Women Billionaires” last year said that 11 of the world’s top 20 richest, independently wealthy women were Chinese. Yet the percentage of women among the top leaders in the Chinese government, especially members and alternate members of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, shrank from 11.4 percent in 1977 to 7.6 percent in 2002. While women can be found serving as officials in more than 80 percent of the country’s provincial-level governments, only about 8 percent have a woman at the head of the government.

This gender discrepancy between the private and public sectors partly illustrates what is recognized as an unbalanced development pattern in China. The nation now has a rapidly maturing market economy alongside a political system that has shown relatively slow progress on reform.

PERCEPTION AND REALITY
In general, two obstacles stand in the way of real progress for women in China’s political sphere. One is perception, and the other is reality.

Many men tend to think that women lack the capacity to engage in politics, which of course is not true. Politics is all about people who take the lead in making collective decisions. That sort of process requires wisdom, vision, management skill and the ability to chart out, execute and revise plans. These abilities are not gender-specific. And today, as more women receive higher education and hone skills in professional arenas, they are prepared more than ever to take on political responsibility.

Yet sometimes misperceptions of women are...
a result of how women see themselves. In many places, women accept traditional, secondary roles in the context of family and society. Girls are accustomed to the idea that being attentive and obedient are virtues, and thus subconsciously give up political and professional opportunities in order to serve family roles. This perception can be altered when female role models become more publicly visible in political, business and social circles, and as more women professionals assume active roles in day-to-day business and social affairs. At Caixin Media, where I am editor-in-chief, more than 60 percent of our newsroom staff are women. Their achievements have put them at the top of China’s journalism industry, among men and women.

The second obstacle to politics facing women in China is the reality of the system. We can hardly expect that situation to change overnight, despite well-intentioned legislation and regulations. India adopted an important constitutional amendment in 1994 that stipulates one-third of the seats in village-level government bodies must be reserved for women. This raised the ratio of females with jobs as village heads. But in fact, the official posts that women win in India are not necessarily powerful. And in many cases, seats reserved for women have been left unfilled, or were eventually assumed by men.

In reality, it can take ages to change minds in a traditionally patriarchal society. Even in Kerala, the Indian state that successfully broke the caste system and whose human development index is comparable to what is found in developed nations, female leaders more often serve as representatives of parties and their policies, not as advocates for women. Reserving a given number of government seats, although an encouraging step and proof of progress, is far from the kind of silver bullet needed to give women equal political power.

Besides, only a minority of Asian women are conversant with their own legal rights. The lack of awareness about the rights and privileges available to women is another hindrance to the influence and impact of legal remedies.

**FEMALE CULTURE**

Georg Simmel wrote in the book *Female Culture* that the world has no neutral ungendered culture because, “with the exception of a very few areas, our objective culture is thoroughly male.” He also said that outstanding performances by women are celebrated as “thoroughly manly.” Modern progress in Asian societies has disproven his argument. Female characteristics are increasingly recognized and included in common notions of leadership. For instance, micro-finance banks today tend to lend to women as they are better family leaders who tend to be less selfish, fairer and more resilient to outside pressure than men. This same conclusion is reflected in a lower corruption rate for female leaders than male and a higher probability that a government will adopt people-oriented policies while giving proper attention to social welfare and public benefits. The list of advantages women have could go on.

Women are accepting multiple roles in society at large and in their families. Sometimes these roles conflict, usually due to friction over social norms and popular expectations. For Asian women to participate more actively and widely in politics, to make having female leaders at the top the norm rather than the exception and to broaden the horizons of the political scene, we need new thinking within and across borders. That can only happen if we make the voices of women heard, ensure women’s actions are visible to the public and approach political participation with firm determination.

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