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Citation

Choi, N. (2019). Women's political pathways in Southeast Asia. *International Feminist Journal Of Politics*, 21(2), 224-248. doi:10.1080/14616742.2018.1523683

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Nankyung Choi (2019) Women's political pathways in Southeast Asia, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 21:2, 224-248, DOI: [10.1080/14616742.2018.1523683](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1523683)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1523683>



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Women's political pathways in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

While Southeast Asian women's socioeconomic status and formal political rights have improved significantly in recent decades, women remain under-represented in the region's political institutions, especially at local levels of governance. Although interest in Southeast Asian women's political representation has increased in recent years, our understanding of women's experiences in their pursuit of elected office remains limited. Through a critical reading of the literature on women and politics and an examination of experiences in Southeast Asia, this article highlights gaps between normative theories and elite-biased empirical studies of women's political advancement and the conditions, processes and outcomes observed across several Southeast Asian countries. Drawing on original ethnographic research in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, this article identifies three major pathways by which women in Southeast Asia have sought election and re-election to political office. In so doing, the article highlights the significance of understanding women's varied experiences and suggests an agenda for further research.

KEYWORDS Women; political pathways; Indonesia; the Philippines; Thailand; Vietnam; Southeast Asia

Across Southeast Asia, women remain under-represented in representative political institutions, particularly at local levels of governance. While hardly unique in this regard, the limited extent of improvements in Southeast Asian women's representation in local political institutions stands in tension with the prevailing sense that women in Southeast Asia have seen important gains in their socioeconomic status and with respect to the extent and exercise of their formal political rights. Indeed, while the scholarly literature evidences an increased interest in women's political representation in Southeast Asia, our understanding of women's experiences in pursuing elected office and the factors that have shaped the patterns and outcomes of these experiences remains limited.

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This article contends that an examination of Southeast Asian women's pathways to elected office in the region's local political institutions can generate valuable insights for our understanding of politics in Southeast Asia while also contributing to the broader theoretical literature on women in politics. Addressing the scholarly literature, the first section highlights a notable disconnect between prevailing assumptions about the contributions of democratic reforms, decentralization and quota systems to women's political representation and the limited gains that are actually observed, while also flagging the elite bias and gender stereotypes that one encounters in empirical studies of women politicians. Establishing the context of this study, the second section compares women's representation in Southeast Asia's national and local political institutions in greater detail, suggesting that democratic reforms, decentralization and quota initiatives have occasioned little visible improvement.

Drawing on a reading of existing literature and original ethnographic research, the third section identifies three distinctive pathways by which women in Southeast Asia have pursued local political office. These include an elite path, a grassroots path and a varied set of "middle" paths. The features of these distinctive political pathways are discussed and illustrated by way of ethnographic analytic narratives drawn from the region's four most populous countries: Indonesia; the Philippines; Thailand; and Vietnam. Not surprisingly, this article finds that it is Southeast Asian women from elite backgrounds that experience the fewest obstacles in attaining political office, both nationally and locally, while women who have sought or gained elected office through support from grassroots movements have faced much tougher odds. Among the three, the middle pathways may be most intriguing and in need of empirical and theoretical analysis. Across contemporary Southeast Asia, we observe women forging diverse and sometimes novel middle pathways to political power. These middle pathways also appear to reflect efforts to translate demographic, socio-economic and institutional shifts into increasingly entrepreneurial use of electoral strategies that mix time-tested and newer verities of campaign methods.

Overall, the analysis developed in this article highlights gaps between normative theories of women's political advancement and conditions, practices, processes and outcomes experienced in Southeast Asia. It details the gains and limitations of the extant literature on women's political advancement and contributes to an understanding of various constraints women face in pursuing electoral office at local levels. Drawing on ethnographic research, the analysis distinguishes and illustrates three sets of pathways to political power, including an emerging diverse set of non-elite and non-grassroots paths that reflect both changing political and socioeconomic circumstances and entrepreneurial experimentation with electoral opportunities. In so doing, the article suggests a research agenda for analyzing more

systematically Southeast Asian women's experiences and their significance, both practically and with respect to the theorization of women and politics in a variety of settings.

Assumptions and quotas, elite bias and stereotypes

While there is wide agreement that Southeast Asian women have experienced gains in their socioeconomic status and formal political rights (Milwertz 2002; Lilja 2008; Fleschenberg and Derichs 2011), their representation in positions of political leadership and representative institutions lags far behind that of men – both nationally and especially at local levels of governance – and does not compare favorably with women in many other world regions.

Globally and in Asia in particular, there has been mounting recognition of and popular support for the notion that increasing women's political representation is a worthy goal, one fundamental to enhancing the responsiveness of political institutions and the promotion of social equity more broadly. Not only have women's rights advocates and international aid organizations, like UN Women and the Global Fund for Women, campaigned for and invested in efforts to help women gain more political power, states across much of the world and in Asia in particular have introduced measures to promote women's advancement in politics. Be that as it may, patterns of gender inequality that prevail across societies and political institutions of Asia and other world regions present women with a host of constraints with the result that women remain persistently under-represented, particularly at local levels of governance (Iwanaga 2008a; 2008b; UNDP 2010a; Hawkesworth 2012).

Within the vast literature on women's political advancement, the survey of the literature presented here highlights ways in which the literature contributes to but falls short of providing an adequate basis for the analysis of women's varied experiences in Southeast Asia. I do so first by highlighting an apparent disconnect between prevailing assumptions about the favorable impacts of democratic reforms, economic growth or decentralized politics and the quite limited changes that have been observed. Next I highlight contributions and limitations of scholarly and policy debates on interventions – such as gender quotas – meant to address women's under-representation in elected office. Finally, I note that, in Asia in general and in Southeast Asia in particular, what little has been written on the subject of women and politics has had an elite bias, resulting in a small number of ideographic and highly biographical analyses of female political elites who predominantly come from dynastic political families. As we will observe, while each of these literatures generates valuable insights and questions, none alone provides an adequate basis for understanding Southeast Asian women's experiences and, in particular, the experiences of Southeast Asian women vying for election to executive or legislative political office.

Women's political advancement through political reforms

It is widely assumed that democratic reforms, economic development and political decentralization are conducive to women's political advancement and election to representative political institutions (e.g., Lee and Clark 2000; Jones 2006; Waylen 2007, 2008; Soetjijpto 2010). The claim that democratic, rather than authoritarian, political systems provide women with more equal opportunities finds empirical support, even though the weakness of a direct correlation between democratic maturation and women's political advancement has been acknowledged (Inglehart, Norris, and Welzel 2002; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Likewise, women's expanded access to education and employment has been considered as a "core driver of democratic development" during the latter part of the twentieth century (Wyndow, Li, and Mattes 2013). Once achieved, women's higher political participation and representation are assumed to be in turn beneficial to the quality of democracy (Ballington and Karam 2005; Fleschenberg and Derichs 2011). These assumptions and claims stand in tension with conditions and experiences in South-east Asia and beyond (Tremblay 2007; Iwanaga 2008b).

More recently, analysts have claimed that decentralization – particularly in combination with democratic reforms – promotes or has the potential to promote women's political advancement (Bryld 2001; Budianta 2006; Rincker 2009). According to such accounts, devolving power and resources to local politicians can be expected to improve both women's political participation and representation. Decentralization is projected to "bring politics closer to home while at the same time may help shift the balance between women and men by providing enough power and opportunity conducive for conducting transformations at the local level" (Siahaan 2002). Election to local office in representative institutions is viewed as a particularly important entry point for women politicians.

In practice, the impacts of decentralization policies on women's political advancement often appear to have done little to disrupt prevailing patterns, with the result that women still hold many fewer offices than men. Decentralization notwithstanding, the gendered norms and attitudes in political institutions have proven durable and compatible to decentralized politics. Analysts have found that under decentralization, local women are just as often marginalized rather than empowered. Indeed, decentralization can generate opportunities for "the domination of the stronger groups over local power and resources" (Byrne and Laier 1996: cited in Siahaan 2002; Rincker 2009). Reforms that decentralize electoral systems can also raise the financial costs of political aspirants, often disfavoring women who tend to have fewer resources (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Krook 2010; for the impact of electoral decentralization on the use of money and other transactional exchanges, see, for example, Arghiros 2001; Aspinall and Sukmajati [2016]).

Affirmative action for a critical mass

The apparent slowness of gains in women's representation in political institutions has prompted some to advocate the use of gender quotas. Advocates of gender quotas argue that women have to form a "critical mass" so as to represent not only descriptively but also substantively. Since the early 1990s, more than 100 countries have adopted gender quotas, mostly through reserved seats or legislative quotas (Krook 2008, 360). However, the practical outcomes of gender quotas, legislated or voluntary, have been mixed at best (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Dahlerup 2006; Oh 2016; Hillman 2018).

Some observers state that quota policies are often adopted as a result of a combination of normative and pragmatic motivations. Political elites often endorse gender quotas in ways that might be unsympathetically viewed as "empty gestures" to claim their "commitment to women's rights without necessarily altering existing patterns of representation" (Krook 2008, 353). Others question the linkage between women's descriptive and substantive representation (Beckwith 2007; Childs and Krook 2009). Criticisms are also raised on equity grounds, alleging that they can have the undesired effect of preventing more qualified candidates from being elected and thus contradicting principles of equality of opportunity (UNDP 2010b, 91).

Political dynasties and moral capital

In contrast to the literatures that advocate for macro-level change or a legislative means to equalize the playing field, empirical studies show that women can rise to powerful positions because of their gender and prevalent gender stereotypes. One set of studies focuses on women from "political dynasties," while another looks into the tendency of emphasizing women's moral superiority. I briefly discuss each in turn.

The political dynasty literature focuses on elite women in Asia's contemporary political history (Richter 1990-91; Thompson 2002-03; Frieson 2001; Jalalzai 2004). Its underlying reasoning is that women's political pathways in the region have been "historically distinctive and exceptional" (Richter 1990-01, 539). As Richter (1990-91, 528) observes, in South and Southeast Asia, "the most important political posts open to women have been so because of familial ties to prominent male politicians" (see also Asia-Pacific Human Development Report 2010, 85; Tatlow 2012). So, patriarchal political culture does not pose an obstacle to women from privileged families.

Coming from dynastic families with high socioeconomic status, they often have little or no political experience (Fleschenberg 2008). They also frequently operate with "a different voice" and style than their male counterparts (Richter 1990-91, 538). Here it should be noted that elite women politicians have

exhibited a stubborn unwillingness to challenge the prevailing patriarchal gender ideology (Everett 2014), explaining their disappointing record in improving other women's rights and status (Richter 1990–91; Derichs, Fleschenberg, and Hüstebeck 2006). One example is Indonesia's first President Sukarno's daughter Megawati Soekarnoputri, who became the country's first female president in 2001 and was hailed as a symbol of women's political advancement. But she soon turned out to be far less interested in women's issues even compared to her predecessor President Abdurrahman Wahid (Blackburn 2004, 94).

Another set of empirical studies suggests that women, whether from elite or non-elite backgrounds, can benefit from their presumptively greater moral capital. There is a tendency, for example, to portray or perceive women politicians as "more honest and responsive" than their male counterparts (Wollack 2010). Women politicians are often praised for their "feminine" political qualities – e.g., that they are inclusive, consultative, collaborative, more tolerant, people-oriented and focused on problem-solving (Asia-Pacific Human Development Report 2010, 104). In this set of studies, the concept of "gendering moral capital" is mentioned or alluded to as distinguishing features of women's attributes and strategies. Drawing on the cases of South Korea's Park Geun-hye, Japan's Makiko Tanaka, Malaysia's Wan Azizah and Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi, Derichs, Fleschenberg, and Hüstebeck (2006) argue that Asia's women politicians have used their moral capital, like honesty, modesty and religiosity, in mobilizing support and obtaining political influence. However, women politicians' reliance on moral capital has been problematic as public expectations can easily be dashed by misdeeds, large or small (Derichs, Fleschenberg, and Hüstebeck 2006, 250; Everett 2014, 202), ranging from the abuse of power and bribery (as in the case of South Korea) to complicity in ethnic cleansing (in the case of Myanmar). Whether the repercussions of political corruption on women politicians are any greater or more harmful than to their male counterparts is an interesting question for another study.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted aspects of the literature on women and politics in general and in Asia in particular deemed to be of special relevance to an investigation of experiences in Southeast Asia. By calling attention to widely held assumptions of the presumptive contributions of democratic reforms, development and decentralization to women's political advancement, highlighting the uncertain contributions of quotas, and noting the contributions and limits of analyses of elite women politicians, it has identified areas critical to exploring Southeast Asian women's varied experiences. And it is to a discussion of women in Southeast Asia's local politics that the article now turns.

Women in Southeast Asia's local politics

Given wide interest in women's political advancement in Southeast Asia, strikingly little attention has been given to the determinants of women's political achievement, or lack thereof, in local politics and governance. The literature on women and politics in the region remains fixated on high-profile national figures (Richter 1990; Parawansa 2002; Thompson 2002; Fleschenberg 2008; Jalalzai and Krook 2010; Derichs and Thompson 2013). This emphasis on women in national politics can be explained by the view that "a significant part of policy-making is done at the center" as well as the availability of data at this level (Prasad 2002, 14). Despite the recent waves of decentralization that have shifted the center of decision-making to local sites (for example, Dewi 2015), the problem of scant data on women in local politics still deters our attempts to have a better picture and understanding of them. By lowering the unit of analysis to local levels, however, we can appreciate that women's political advancement has been slower at local levels than what advocates for women's political rights had hoped for.

National versus local, legislative versus executive

To explore women's political advancement in Southeast Asia, we can consider experiences in the region's four most populous countries. These include, in alphabetical order and according to the World Bank's most recent (2016) population estimates, Indonesia (population 261 million), the Philippines (103 million), Thailand (68 million) and Vietnam (94 million). The diverse social, relational and institutional attributes that characterize Southeast Asian countries present women and analysts of women's political advancement with a range of challenges. Indonesia is a sprawling, diverse and predominantly Islamic society that has experienced sweeping political and social transformations, on the one hand, and a shift towards conservative Islam, on the other. The Philippines, by contrast, is a Catholic-dominant society in which local "big men" have historically dominated politics and governmental institutions. In predominantly Buddhist Thailand, the tumultuous history of democratic movements, military coups and popular uprisings that have unfolded over the past three decades have presented women with distinctive challenges. While in communist-led Vietnam, political office – determined more by appointment than by election – nonetheless remains a crucial path to social mobility within the Communist Party. Despite differences in political and socio-cultural settings, by lowering the unit of analysis to provincial and district levels this article detects both similar patterns and noticeable differences in women's political under-representation across borders.

At the national level, women's political representation in these Southeast Asian societies has been parallel with the regional average of 19.7 percent

(in 2017). The Philippines (29.5 percent) and Vietnam (26.7 percent) have even higher figures than the global average (23.4 percent), while Thailand slid to under 5 percent in 2014 (IPU, Women in Parliaments, accessed on 29 September 2017). By contrast, women's representation in local legislatures has been consistently lower across the region. Table 1 shows the data from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, with the Philippines and Vietnam on the high end and Thailand on the low end; Indonesia is situated in between.

This is remarkable given that all four countries have adopted various forms and degrees of decentralization since the early 1990s: the Philippines Local Government Code (1991); Vietnam's State Budget Law (1996); Thailand's new Constitution (1997); and Indonesia's Regional Autonomy laws (1999). These decentralization policies have devolved significant decision-making power and/or fiscal resources to local decision-makers, from which women have not fully benefited or at least not as much as prevailing assumptions have projected. In fact, a recent UNDP report (2014a, 28) suggests "approaches that work on a national level are not necessarily appropriate to or successful at the subnational level." Women's activists in Malaysia find that women's political success is determined less by policy-making than by the national political environment and interactions among various local actors (Lee 2011, 33). A case study of post-Communist Poland also confirms that "[t]he increased proximity of sub-national governments to women does not automatically lead to greater political associability for women" (Rincker 2009, 64).

So what explains the gap between women's political advancement at the national level, which is of itself far from encouraging, and at local levels? A way of explaining this persistent gap is examining the complex and dynamic interplays between institutional factors, like gender quotas and electoral systems, and their practical impact on women's proportion in political institutions at different levels of government. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines are illustrative of women's persistently low political representation in local legislative institutions, despite the overall increase in women's political representation (Table 2). As will be elaborated below, the two countries' experiences demonstrate that gender quotas and electoral systems do not

Table 1. Proportion of women in national and subnational legislatures (2017).

	National	Provincial	District/municipal
Indonesia	17.1%	16%	14%
The Philippines	28.6%	19.9%	21.4%
Thailand	4.8%	12.6%*	n/a
Vietnam	26.8%	26.4%	24.6%^

*data for 2010.

^data for the period 2011–2016.

Source: Compiled by the author.

alone make significant difference to women's descriptive representation across different levels of government.

Indonesia adopted gender quotas in 2004 but they were not effectively implemented until 2009, as there were no official sanctions for non-compliance. The proportion of women in the national assembly rose from 11.8 percent in 2004 to 18.6 in 2009. In 2014, however, the new electoral law requiring one out of every three candidates on the party lists to be a woman disappointingly resulted in a slight decline (to 17.1 percent) rather than a big increase in women's electoral success. The progressive vertical rank-order of the quotas was counteracted by the open party-list system, by which candidates receiving the most votes can win a seat regardless of their ranks on the party list. The fierce competition among candidates, even from the same party, undermined women's electoral chances. As Latin American cases also demonstrate, the open list tends to make "electoral processes deeply unequal" as candidates are free to organize their own campaign funds (Sacchet 2014, 153). Disappointed activists and organizations immediately suggested returning to the closed-list PR system, which would limit interparty rivalry, ensure the election of one woman in every three seats, and lower campaign costs. However, the dilemma is that such reversion will also resuscitate political party leaders' oligarchic power over the selection of candidates and even eventual winners.

By contrast, the Philippines has no legislated quotas for the national parliament, but one of the three functional representatives in all sub-national councils is to be a woman. Despite this lack of legislated quotas, however, Filipino women have fared better in the national parliament, making the country the region's exception. In 2016, for example, the Philippines was the world's seventh most gender equal society among 144 economies according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2016. Instead of gender quotas, the country enacted the Party List System Law (RA 7941) in 1995, which in theory provides women with an important political opportunity. The law stipulates:

20 percent of the 250 seats in the House of Representatives will be allotted to "small" political parties and sectoral groups. Party-list groups have to get at

Table 2. Percentages of women in the legislative institutions of Indonesia and the Philippines (2004–2017).

Proportions	Indonesia			The Philippines				
	2004	2009	2014	2004	2007	2010	2013	2016
Women MPs at the national level	11.8	18.3	17.1	16	19	23	27.2	28.6
Women MPs at the provincial level	10	16	16	17	16	16	21.8	19.9
Women MPs at the district/municipal level	8	12	14	17	18	19	20	21.4

Source: Compiled by the author.

least two per cent of the total votes cast for party-lists to obtain a Congressional seat. (Veneracion-Rallonza 2008, 237)

However, as Cunanan-Angsioco (2000, 11) shows in her case study of an experimental women's organization in the 1998 elections, grassroots women faced a range of "inevitable difficulties," including the lack of financial resources, political or electoral experiences, connections, and public recognition. It was only in 2004 that two women's political parties competed with sixty-four other party list groups and the Gabriela Women's Party won one seat for the first time by obtaining 3.6 percent of the total vote. Since 2007, the party has maintained two seats in the House of Representatives.

Within the context of under-representation, the two countries are somewhat different in that Filipino women have a greater share of political representation at all levels. It can be attributed to the fact that, just like men, women candidates are drawn from an elite socio-economic background (Prasad 2002, 139–140). In fact, this class factor seems to cast a long shadow over the advancement of women's rights and interests. Familial ties have played a key role in women's political pathways in the Philippines' post-colonial politics, often compromising their ability to represent effectively and substantively (Veneracion-Rallonza 2008, 219). Therefore, the estimate that 45 percent of the women elected to the 12th Congress were "replacements of relatives previously in the House of Representatives" might not be an exaggeration (Palatino 2010: cited in Reyes and Yang 2015, 5). In the 14th Congress, 15 percent of congresswomen were also identified as wives of former congressmen who had just served their third terms. The media often portrays women politicians as "term breakers" or "political alternates" who keep the post simply to protect their families' interests (Reyes and Yang 2015, 5).

Women's scant presence in executive institutions in the region is even more striking. As Table 3 shows, women mayors and governors are particularly rare in Indonesia. Despite a decade of electoral decentralization and a female population of 130 million, Indonesia has only 34 women among 500 mayors and district heads. Despite a relative increase in women's representation in legislative institutions, women have continued to face concerns and stereotypes about their capacity to take charge, be a leader, and

Table 3. Women in the executive institutions of Indonesia and the Philippines (2017).

	National	Provincial	District/municipal
Indonesia	21%	0	6.7%
The Philippines	10.2%	23.5%	23.1%

Note: For the national data, the proportion of women among the ministries in both countries' cabinets are used, while governors and mayors/district heads are elected through popular votes in both countries. The most recent elections were held in 2014 in Indonesia and in 2016 in the Philippines.

Source: Compiled by the author.

manage a bureaucracy and a big budget (see also UNDP 2014b, 19). Many Asian voters still prefer men to women for a political office. Moreover, few women have enough resources and political capital to run for high-cost executive elections.

Thailand and Vietnam are not included in Table 3 due to the different structures of government and the lack of data, but they appear to be in similar situations. In Thailand, in 2006, the proportion of women in local, village and sub-district (*tambon*), administration was only 9 percent. They accounted for only 2.9 percent of sub-district headships and 4.3 percent of village headships and assistant village headships, while local administrations also had a disproportionately small proportion (only 11.3 percent) of women (UNDP 2008, 180–181). In Vietnam, despite relatively higher women’s representation in the National Assembly and local People’s Councils, only one out of 22 ministers is a woman (the Minister of Health), down from two (UN Viet Nam 2016, 76). Despite the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011–2016 and the National Action Programme on Gender Equality 2016–2020 that have specific objectives and targets for “strengthening women leaders at the administrative and legislative” institutions, the Communist Party of Viet Nam, which forms the pool for political candidates, has only one woman in the Central Committee Secretariat (UN Viet Nam 2016, 72–74).

Despite the piecemeal data, it can be argued that Southeast Asian women’s political gains have been persistently low in local legislative institutions despite the overall increase in women’s political representation. Women’s presence in the region’s local executive offices has been even more scarce. As discussed earlier, institutional and cultural factors cannot be enough to account for women’s slow and small political advances in Southeast Asia, particularly at local levels. Institutional change designed to address structural obstacles, such as the electoral system and the lack of party support, is important, but does not remove barriers to women’s entry to a political office, particularly patriarchal norms and attitudes.

Women’s political pathways

In Southeast Asia, large-scale processes of political, institutional and cultural change have affected local conditions, processes and outcomes bearing on women’s pursuit of political office. To see how, this article looks beyond a handful of women in positions of national leadership and examines the processes and outcomes of women’s power-seeking at local levels. Rather than pursuing the much larger and for now impossible task of presenting a representative sample of the entire region, the article uses life stories of a small sample of local women politicians in the region in order to shed light on what Gollifer (2013, 298) calls “the gendered nature of these complexities and contradictions” of women’s experiences of pursuing elected office.

By political pathways, I refer to mechanisms by which women decide to pursue political office and power, explore options, mobilize resources, develop networks or relationships with constituents, and build distinctive political styles. By following pathways in which individuals choose a particular course of action, react to the outside world, or proactively realize her/his projects, the approach elucidates “the complexity of the sequences of cause and effect in human lives” (Bertaux and Thompson 1997, 17). Given its small sample, this article can only provide a glimpse of such contextual complexity and limits its analysis to *what* motivates women to pursue political office and *how* they do it. Motivations in particular appear to have a long-lasting impact on women’s political journeys, whether in terms of their leadership styles or choosing different paths of political mobility (Tadros 2011). Women’s political pathways are also shaped by how they pursue and win political office, as the sources of political capital and electoral strategies used by women candidates seem to impact the meaning and practices of their political representation.

Drawing on my reading of the literature and also my preliminary findings, I identify three major pathways of women’s political advancement in Southeast Asia. The first two groups of women politicians are relatively familiar, although the latter has received much less attention: those whose assumption of power was “mediated” by male relatives; and those whose political careers were “shaped from the beginning by their own choices, attributes and efforts, grounded in a strong sense of their own political efficacy” (Fleschenberg 2008, 35). Women of the first *elite pathways* rely on entrenched power, while those of the second *grassroots pathways* take on specific local issues. In fact, these two distinctive patterns of women’s political advancement explain the persistently low numbers of women office-holders in local politics. To plunge into the political world where men still dominate and dictate the rules of the game, they often need to focus single-mindedly on their motivations to pursue power, whether for their families or for their constituents.

In the meantime, there is a third set – slowly forming, diverse, admittedly residual, but nonetheless significant and, in some respects, novel – of *middle pathways*, reflecting demographic, socioeconomic and institutional changes across and within countries. These emerging middle pathways seem to attract mostly younger generations of women, neither from elitist backgrounds nor accidentally stumbling onto politics through a single cause. They appear to pursue political office in order to access to policy-making, material rewards and/or social prestige. They also seem more entrepreneurial in their choices of electoral strategies by mixing both traditional and new campaign methods. Table 4 compares the main features of the three pathways in terms of motivations, political capital and strategies in seeking political office, as well as their personal circumstances in launching political careers.

Interestingly, in all three pathways, persuasion seems to play a key role in women’s decisions to run for election. Almost all the women I met said that

Table 4. Women's political pathways compared.

	Elite pathways	Grassroots pathways	Middle pathways
Motivations	Persuasion by male relatives; "bench-warming" tactics to sustain and extend family achievements, interests and reputations	Frustrations about corrupt and incompetent (male) politicians; political power sought as a means for decision-making	Ambitions (material rewards or social prestige); "politics as a vocation;" political entrepreneurs or challengers
Political capital	Familial ties; support from political machines and connections; name recognition	Experiences; commitment to "the people;" trust from supporters; achievements and reputations	Affirmative-action policies; media savvy; personal connections and/or social networks
Strategies	Carrier of family names; use of elitist feminine symbolism; "gendering moral capital"	Feminine (smile, soft, caring, clean); or assuming what have been "sociologically male" roles	Entrepreneurial mix of old and new campaign methods; flexible use of feminine and masculine aura
Personal circumstances	Both young and old; relatively well educated with or without professions; relatively short-term experience in formal politics; financial security	Sample observed in this study clustered in the ages of 50 and above; relatively long-term experiences in formal politics; lack of resources	Younger generation; relatively well educated with or without professions; middle-class backgrounds

they had begun their political careers not initially out of their own impetus, but because they were persuaded by families, communities or someone else. For some, their decision to run was taken to sustain and extend their families' achievements, power and political and economic interests. Others reported that their decisions owed to critical junctures in local politics; for example, when their communities became so disheartened with corrupt, uncaring and authoritarian male politicians that the possibility of "giving chances" to women became increasingly attractive. In respects, the role of persuasion in women's decisions to seek political office may be changing. For while women's pursuit of political office is no doubt complex, recent years have seen a new and younger generation of educated and entrepreneurial women take advantage of gender quotas and half-hearted offers from political parties to pursue elected office.

In what follows, I establish, juxtapose and compare the three different pathways by which Southeast Asia's women gain office and power in local political institutions. While this trichotomy of elite, grassroots and middle pathways may be used for grasping national women politicians' experiences, lowering our analytical gaze to local levels allows us to see how and why the election of small numbers of women to national political office does not automatically translate into meaningful changes in the conditions, process and outcomes of women's pursuit of political office at local levels of governance.

Elite pathways

Family ties are critical to women's political careers in Southeast Asia, although men also benefit from familial networks for their political gains (McVey 2000; Sidel 2004; Ufen 2006; Hawkesworth 2012). Women often enter politics to carry on the achievements and reputations of their fathers, husbands or brothers. As discussed earlier, this elite pattern is quite discernible in the Philippines (Tapales 2001, 4). Women's political representation saw a sudden increase in 1998 and 2001 as a consequence of the 1987 Constitution that imposed mandatory term limits of nine years. Since then, women's political representation has steadily increased at all levels, from national to city, both legislative and executive. Viewed as "benchwarmers" for their male relatives, similar to the "proxy women" in India's local councils (Everett 2014, 201), these women's independence from their male family members is often doubted.

Although not as ubiquitous as in the Philippines, Indonesia has recently seen the rise of political dynasties in political parties and local elections (Trajano and Kenawas 2013). In 2009, 41.7 percent of women elected to the national assembly were found to be "heiresses of political dynasties" (PUSKAPOL FISIP UI's survey cited in Warat 2013). Among the 97 women MPs in the national assembly for the period 2014–19, 36 percent have familial relationships as wives, daughters or sisters of elected politicians or party leaders (PUSKAPOL FISIP UI 2014, 6). Almost a quarter of local women politicians are found to have familial relationships with other politicians: 24 percent of the 86 women MPs in 11 provincial assemblies have husbands in parties (94 percent in the same parties), while 29 and 22 percent of them have either parents or siblings in political parties, respectively (69 percent and 89 percent in the same parties, respectively) (Kemitraan 2014, 20). Warat (2013) explains this by party leaders' shortsighted response to gender quota requirements. Party elites tend to nominate family members on the candidate lists rather than recruiting and training women cadres through the party structure. She also points out that "the pool of women with financial resources to support expensive campaigns – and pay for adequate domestic support when they are occupied with politics – is limited." Reflecting the growing public concern, the Indonesian government proposed so-called "anti-dynasty provision" for the 2013 Local Elections Bill (Trajano and Kenawas 2013), which passed as a law in 2015.

Agnes Magpale, the current vice governor of Cebu, illustrates this pathway well. As a niece of the former President Carlos P. Garcia, she was trained in nutrition and earned an M.A. degree from Drexel University in the United States. She first ran for election in 1992 to replace her cousin as a provincial board member. She served three consecutive terms (1992–2001) and returned to politics in 2004. In 2011, she assumed the position of Vice Governor to fill out the term left behind by the late Vice Gov. Gregorio Sanchez Jr. As

she describes, as “the turn of events in her political career would have it,” she became Acting Governor for six months in December 2012 when the then Governor Gwendolyn Garcia was found guilty of grave abuse of authority. She secured her position by successfully running for two consecutive elections in 2013 and 2016. When I met with her two days after her reelection in May 2013, she introduced herself as one of the hardest working politicians, but she also admitted that her political entry in 1992 was “possible only because of her cousin’s political machines,” when she actually ran against the cousin’s own sister, which is not uncommon on the country’s political scene (Interview, Cebu, 16 May 2013).

Women politicians rising through elite pathways often learn politics from their male family members by accompanying them, mobilizing support for them, sharing their responsibilities and providing them with advice. By the time they decide to plunge into politics as political candidates, they are familiar with the culture and procedure of politics. According to Jalalzai and Krook (2010, 9), it is more compelling for women to inherit political power because they are often seen as politically not ambitious and good at providing unity of family. They begin their political careers when their personal environments are conducive (e.g., grown-up children, flexible work schedules for their own professions, and confidence in the networks that they inherit from their male family members). However, taking this pathway does not necessarily indicate that these women have less commitment to their constituents. They still have to “prove” themselves to the canvassers, supporters and male politicians.

Grassroots pathways

Local women politicians frequently lack a support system that allows them to develop and enhance alternative leadership styles and political agendas (Fleschenberg 2008, 50). They often begin their political careers in informal politics as problem-solvers. Unlike stereotypical images of Southeast Asian women landing powerful positions due to their familial ties, these “grassroots” women launch their political engagements out of their frustration with corrupt and incompetent leadership or motivated by a community issue ignored by local government. By the time they decide to run for election, they usually have years or decades of experiences of working in and with local communities. Mostly coming from non-privileged backgrounds, these women begin their political experience at the grassroots level as communal leaders or mediators of public service or village heads. Their pursuit of power is often conceived as a means, rather than a goal, to partake in decision-making on behalf of the people. Therefore, many women in this category run for executive head positions, as a legislative representative is perceived to have limitations in affecting policy-making.

In a rare edited volume that focuses on women in Thai politics, Vichit-Vadakan (2008) draws our attention to the oft-overlooked personal dimensions of local women politicians' political journeys. Different from the women of elite pathways who are often equipped with a wealth of experience and acceptance by the public, women on grassroots pathways face constraints and barriers stemming from the lack of experience of speaking in public and knowledge about bureaucratic procedures or rules. As Vichit-Vadakan (2008, 144–145) observes, it is often their commitment to the “common good,” their service to the community, and their desire to make a difference in people's everyday lives that eventually lead them to run for a formal position. This dimension of motivation also explains why many of them express no desire to advance to national politics.

The stories of Witthayaluk Sarnjai, a member of Chiang Mai provincial council representing Nong Kwai Tambon of Hang Dong District since 2009, are illustrative. She told me that there was too much political corruption, while the infrastructure of the district was poor and needed to be addressed. As the owner of a wood-carving business with around fifty workers that exports mostly to Norway and Europe, she used to be too busy with her business and have no time for politics. But she was one of the subdistrict's few educated and resourceful women, so she began working for the sub-district office and eventually “wanted to improve the quality of the villagers' life” (Interview, Chiang Mai, 15 March 2012). She ran for election in 2009, for which the support from her family, including her husband who was a mid-ranking police officer, was critical. When I met Witthayaluk in 2012, there were eight women among forty-two members of the provincial council. She said, politics is about working for the community and she enjoyed resolving problems together with the people.

Women rising through grassroots pathways often lack institutional bases and have to deal with constant attempts to humiliate or challenge them. As the following two cases from Indonesia testify, women who lack institutional experiences can face quite disastrous political situations: Ratna Ani Lestari, the former Banyuwangi district head (2005–2010); and Tri Rismaharini, mayor of Surabaya since 2010.

Ratna Ani Lestari was the favorite candidate among rank-and-file cadres of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in the 2005 Banyuwangi district head election, but the party endorsed a different candidate. The 2005 election was the first direct election in which two thirds of 1.2 million registered voters chose their district head. The PDI-P did not nominate Ratna, but she managed to collect support from small parties and chose a deputy candidate from a well-regarded Islamic preacher's family. Ratna's unexpected electoral victory came as a big surprise, as the favorite candidate was the chairman of the district assembly who was widely anticipated to win the election outright. While elites were preoccupied with parties' internal conflicts and

intimidating each other, however, there were already indications that voters were looking for a cleaner and more responsive leader who could deliver practical benefits, like the “free” education and health services that the Ratna campaign promised (Choi 2009, 155–156).

Both Banyuwangi’s politicians and religious leaders saw the newly elected regent as a political threat and cultural challenge to their patrimonial domination. Accustomed to an overwhelmingly male-dominated political leadership, they also showed a degree of reluctance to pay respect to a female district head. Male elites’ unhappiness about the election result was transmitted through two sensitive issues: religion and money. First, Muslim leaders put her religion under scrutiny because she was a Muslim married to a Hindu. Second, they leveled allegations that Ratna had been involved in money politics, which had already circulated during the campaigns but gained serious attention only after the announcement of election results. By translating the electoral dispute into issues concerning faith and morality, Banyuwangi’s dominant elites justified their collective aversion to the newly elected woman district head. The strong resentment that Ratna faced from various groups of local elites culminated when the Banyuwangi district assembly decided to reject the election results. For the following four months, both political and religious leaders jointly fought to block Ratna from taking office. However, the PDI-P representatives at the district assembly changed their position, obeying the instruction from the party’s national board. Next, a group of fifteen young assembly members, called the Young Caucus (*kaucus muda*), voiced views different from their parties’ official lines. Eventually, the assembly’s leaders accepted the election results and let Ratna take office. Yet it was not the end of the mayhem and Banyuwangi’s politics and governance continued to be fractured by a bitter power struggle between the new district head and entrenched elites who were unwilling to yield their patrimonial dominance (Choi 2009, 160–161).

The political journey of Tri Rismaharini, the current mayor of Surabaya in Indonesia’s East Java province, is also illustrative of the challenges of women’s grassroots pathways to power. Trained as an architect and city planner, Risma spent twenty years in the civil service before becoming the first woman mayor of the country’s second-largest city in 2010. As the head of the city’s Sanitation and Parks Office, she had already earned a national reputation for her contributions to the city’s transformation from being foul and congested into a green and business-friendly city (Harsaputra 2014). In 2007, the national daily *Koran Tempo* named her as one of the “12 Figures Who Changed Indonesia’s Face,” while the East Java-based daily *Jawa Pos* named her as the “Person of the Year.”

Despite these accolades, Risma faced strong rejection from the city’s established elites and business circles. Not active in party politics until 2010, she

was nominated by the PDI-P as the mayoral candidate to pair with the then Mayor Bambang Dwi Hartono, who had already completed the maximum number of terms. While taking advantage of the media attention on Risma's bureaucratic achievements, what Bambang and other PDI-P elites seemed unprepared for was her stubborn personality and uncompromising working style. After earning over a third of the vote in the 2010 election, Risma quickly became a media darling of both local and national outlets. She was popular not only as the first woman directly elected in the country's political history, but also for her unusually frank and unbending political style as well as her pro-poor programs. Alarmed by Risma's political rise, Surabaya's political and business elites immediately began using all kinds of tactics and political maneuverings to unsettle and even remove her from the political arena (Hakim 2014, 147; Putra n.d.).

Less than a year into her term, Risma had made numerous enemies within and outside her administration. Her issuance of two mayoral regulations (Peraturan Walikota No. 56 and 57/2010) regarding the calculation of the rental price of billboards, which resulted in an increase of 25 percent of the price, invited strong resentment from business circles. Transmitting opposition from business circles, the chairman of the Surabaya municipal assembly, Wishnu Wardhana, initiated a move to impeach her from the mayoral position in January 2011. Deputy Mayor Bambang also joined in by threatening to resign from his post (*The Jakarta Post*, 4 February 2011). Finally, the Minister of Home Affairs intervened in the city's political affair by confirming the legitimacy of Risma's decisions, and in 2013 Wishnu was later recalled and replaced by his own party, the Democrat Party (PD). Still, Risma's relationships with other political elites have hardly improved. Since 2010, she has received numerous threats, including death threats, from many vested groups (Besant 2014).

Risma has survived such political manipulations and was even named as a potential candidate for the 2014 presidential elections. When I met her in the mayoral office in June 2013, Risma reiterated the challenges she had faced and her populist responses to them:

I don't worry about political communication [with other elites]. I know that I have a good grip on regulations and the basics of society, those who elected me. I have no political ambition. My mayoral position is given by Allah. I have to respect the trust from the people and satisfying their needs is the most important. (Interview, Surabaya, 12 June 2013)

Her weak position in the PDI-P's internal politics resurfaced when the party recommended Wisnu Sakti Buana, who had endorsed the move to impeach her in 2011, for the deputy mayoral position. In 2015, she was reelected with over 86 percent of the vote.

Middle pathways

Early twenty-first-century Southeast Asia is witnessing the emergence of a novel set of “middle” pathways by which women pursue elected office in local representative political institutions. These middle paths reflect both broad socio-economic, demographic and institutional changes and what might be best characterized as pursuit of politics as a vocation through entrepreneurial experimentation with a diversity of strategies for acquiring and maintaining political power. While a systematic exploration of the backgrounds and electoral strategies of these women is beyond the scope of this analysis, these women come from a broad range of ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds and their motivations for seeking elected office varies. Some may have an interest in policy-making and policy reforms, while others appear primarily interested in the pursuit of material rewards and/or social prestige. Although there can be various patterns of interplay among personal backgrounds, motivations and strategies, it is worth observing factors that have contributed to their development. Broadly and in a very preliminary sense, these can be understood as factors affecting the push and pull of women into Southeast Asia’s politics.

Among the factors that are seemingly critical to the push of women politicians in Southeast Asia include the region’s demographic development. The region is seeing rapidly growing middle classes, which appear to be the hotbed for a new generation of women politicians: educated, independent, aspiring for upward mobility, and championing women’s rights and gender equality. Yet, family ties or experiences of communal service also feature in women’s stories in this category. So middle-pathway women are wide-ranging, from the wives, sisters and daughters of elected or retired politicians to academics, lawyers and advocates, small-business owners, university students and civil-society activists. Some enter politics benefitting from their family ties or personal connections, but many others stumble into politics. While they benefit from broad change in political, economic and social situations as well as increased awareness about equal opportunities, they tend to translate their political success into personal gains. For some, politics may mean an opportunity for social and political mobility or a lucrative vocation with generous perks. For others, a political office is a means to realize their cause or personal ambitions.

What about factors affecting, or perhaps more aptly limiting, the entrance and advancement of Southeast Asian women politicians? Despite the general democratic retreat observed across Southeast Asia (Vatikiotis 2014; Slater 2017), democratic institutions, like elections and parliaments, have entrenched as core parts of the region’s political systems, democratic or undemocratic, and thus provide women political aspirants with entry points. However, a critical factor for their political success or failure seems to lie in

the role played by formal and informal “gatekeepers,” particularly political parties and brokers. In Indonesia, for instance, political parties still pose the biggest barrier to new political entrants – perhaps more so for women than men (Otto 2014). While trying to promote images of supporting women’s political advancement, Indonesia’s major parties have figured out ways of extending their masculine politics by choosing women candidates just for the sake of the 30 percent quotas and not nurturing them to be more relevant to the operation of parties (Prihatini 2018, 54–55). Indonesian women also face big financial burdens as elections have become increasingly expensive, as broad networks of brokers and distributions of cash and club goods have become the key to electoral success (Tapol 2009; Reuter 2015; Aspinall and Sukmajati 2016). One of the consequences is reflected in apparently low reelection rates among local women legislators. Many women serve only one term, raising questions about the transparency of the nomination process conducted by parties. When running for reelections, women are often asked to run for electoral districts different from the ones they have just represented, which would negate the results of earlier campaigns and force them to start from scratch again (interviews with five municipal and two provincial assembly members, Surabaya, 10–15 June 2013). Only two among the interviewed were reelected in 2014.

Ivy Juana, former member of the Surabaya municipal assembly, offers an insight into this middle pathway. Formerly active in the student organization of the University of 17 August 1945 Surabaya, she ran a shipping-contract business when she received an offer from the Democrat Party (PD) to be listed on the party’s list for the 2009 elections. A widow with three children, she took the offer because she thought political power, unlike protests, would bring her into decision-making. She said, “To realize ideas and objectives, it is necessary to have power and get into the political process” (Interview, Surabaya, 13 June 2013). Once elected, she faced negative perceptions of women politicians as “opportunistic,” “ignorant” or “paranoid” not only from men, including other male assembly members, but also from the party’s leadership. She also pointed out that women rarely made it to leadership positions within the party or the assembly. Other women I met at both the Surabaya municipal and East Java provincial assembly also voiced their frustration with the party leadership’s reluctance to nurture women to become experienced and skilled politicians.

Conclusion

Democratization and decentralization are widely presumed to expand opportunities for women’s political advancement. Yet as this analysis suggests, the effects of decentralization and formally democratic institutions on women’s political advancement are profoundly indeterminate. In the meantime,

experiments with quotas, such as the PR system in Thailand and party quotas in Indonesia, have yet to generate meaningful or intended outcomes. Across the region, structural and institutional features appear to be as formidable as ever, effectively discouraging women from pursuing political office.

Women succeed in navigating their way through their societies' challenging, unfavorable institutional and cultural settings in a variety of ways. This article has sought to shed light on the conditions, means and modalities by which women do so. The analysis presented in this article has identified three distinctive pathways by which women get involved in politics and further develop their political ambitions: elite; grassroots; and middle pathways. While Southeast Asian countries vary in their institutional attributes, these elite, grassroots and middle pathways can be observed across countries, even as countries' unique features present distinctive challenges, complexities and contradictions. Overall, this analysis has highlighted gaps between normative theories or elite-biased empirical studies of women's political advancement and the conditions, practices, processes and outcomes that women actually experience in their pursuit of political office. In so doing, it has aimed to illuminate the complexities of women's political advancement in local politics and to contribute to the theorization of women in politics in Southeast Asia and beyond. At least, this article may constitute a first step towards appreciating the contextual complexity of women's varied experiences with their decisions and strategies while generalizing the conditions, processes and outcomes of women's pursuit of political office.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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