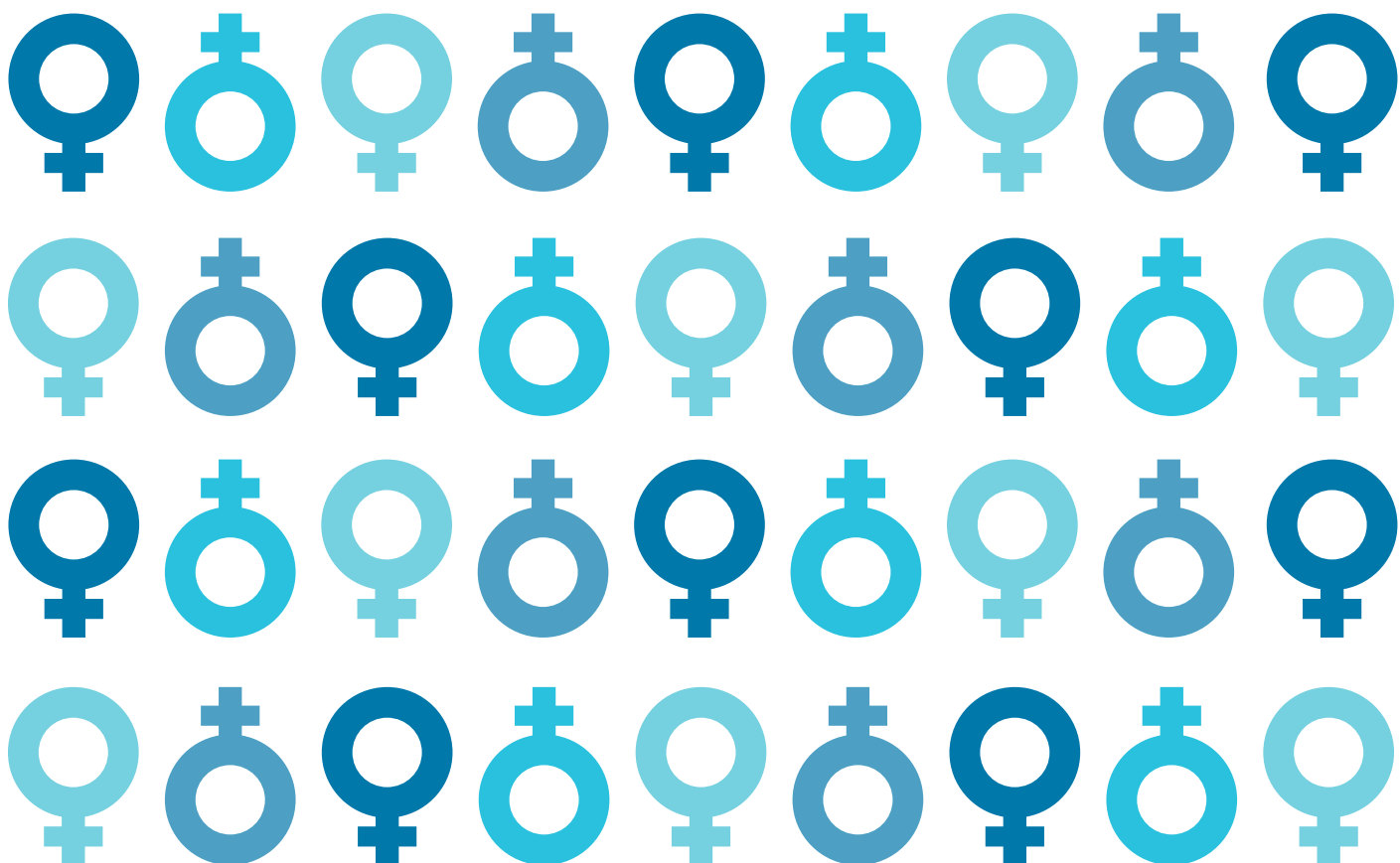


executive summary

Gender analysis of women's
political participation in 7 South-East Asian
countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Philippines,
Indonesia, Sri Lanka, East Timor and Vietnam
2008-2009





Taking “Gender and Development Strategy”, drawn up in 2006 by the SECI-AECI General

Directorate of Planning and Evaluation of Public Policies, the 2005-2008 Master Plan and the new 2009-2012 Master Plan and its Gender Sector Strategy as starting points, Paz y Desarrollo and Enjambra Contra la Explotación Sexual have been working for two years in collaboration with AECID (Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation) with a view to laying the foundations for the design of a Regional Gender Programme in South-East Asia. In order to do so, 7 of the countries considered by the Spanish Agency for Cooperation as priorities and countries meriting special attention in Asia were selected: Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, East Timor, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

In the first stage, from June 2007 to February 2008, the “Elaboration of a Regional Gender Action Plan Proposal in South-East Asia” project helped identify the intervention priority areas that would allow AECID (Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation) to prepare a regional gender strategy. In order to do so, the starting points chosen were “Gender and Development Strategy and Effectiveness of Spanish Cooperation”, prepared in 2006 by SECI-AECID General Directorate of Planning and Evaluation of Public Policies, and the 2005-2008 Master Plan together with the Gender Sector Strategy. Finally, those previously mentioned 7 priority and special attention countries for Spanish cooperation in Asia were selected, and 2 main activities were carried out in these countries: firstly, a seminar was held in the Philippines with representatives of each of the 7 countries, comprising of the main representatives of both public and private bodies (NGOs and civil society); secondly, the development of a Study Tour in Madrid and Seville where Spanish Cooperation tools were presented, with references to examples of equality policies and gender approach implementation throughout the country, as well as good practice models in gender equality projects at local, autonomous and national level. The development of these activities helped elaborate a regional gender strategy for establishing those intervention priority areas at regional level identified through the project, as well as the preparation of documents on gender relations in each national context, with the aim of facilitating the implementation of future projects, both at national and

regional level. Moreover it promoted the possibility of strengthening, through bilateral cooperation or multilateral organisations activities, work in the region that may provide Spanish cooperation agencies with the learning, knowledge and experience tools necessary to implement a regional gender plan.

This analysis corresponds to the second stage designated as the “Regional Gender Programme in South-East Asia – Stage II: Elaboration of a gender analysis focused on women’s political representation in 7 South-East Asia countries (Cambodia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and East Timor)”.

In the previous stage, women’s political representation was established as a priority area for the design of a regional gender strategy. In fact, women’s under-representation in power structures and decision-making positions is both the cause and the result of multiple inequalities suffered in all other areas of life. In turn, gender equality in political participation and representation is an essential condition for any democratic process. Women’s political participation is indispensable for democratic governance. Women’s voices are paramount for democracy to embrace the plurality of needs and interests of the whole society.

Furthermore this priority has been part of the international agenda for several years. Both the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action and the UNDP Human Development Report (1995) set the target of 30 per cent for women’s representation in national decision-making positions as a milestone on the road towards the goal of ultimate equality. Similarly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW – 1979) and the Millennium Development Goals Declaration believe women’s political participation in power structures and decision-making is indispensable for attaining the goal of equality to its full extent.

Finally, beyond its universal nature this has become a crucial issue because it is an integral part of the political changes the South-Eastern region is undergoing.

In fact, on the one hand, all the countries being studied are going through a difficult phase of their political development. After many years of dictatorship in



Cambodia, the Philippines, Indonesia, East Timor, and armed conflicts in Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, all countries are trying to reform and/or build democratic structures with a very fragile balance among the various political forces and with serious periods of political instability characterised by violence and corruption. These situations bring about power struggles characterised by systems where grassroots emerging forces have to compete with big political dynasties based on community and family associations. In the contexts under analysis, the issue of gender equality has been relegated to second place, despite women's role in the political transition processes experienced by countries in the region.

On the other hand, in spite of the strong local patriarchies reflected through various gender coercions varying from one country to the next, with a very clear separation of roles, stereotypes and prejudices towards women's role in society, this region displays an outstanding trajectory in terms of women's political participation and representation: thus, the first women in the world to be elected through democratic processes and to gain the highest political representative positions have achieved so in this region. Moreover some countries have equality measures in place in terms of political representation and there is a significant associative and activist feminist fabric. However, this reality has not had an impact in the lives of most women. The region presents high levels of poverty, illiteracy, social and economic discrimination primarily affecting women. Women's political representation and participation levels are still very low and far from the 30 per cent goal set by UNDP.

Therefore, based on a gender transforming approach, and taking the significance of women's political participation and representation in democratic governance, and in a more integral way, for achieving gender equality in all aspects of life, this analysis aims at:

Firstly, stressing the causes of inequality in political participation and representation in each of these 7 South-East Asian countries by analysing different areas: participation in elections, access and consolidation of women in power positions and their political practices, and civil society as an area for political participation.

For each of these areas, the analysis has strived to find the limiting factors as well as those factors that could potentially lead to the promotion of women's political participation. This analysis has also been combined with identifying the needs of the various actors involved in women's political participation in civil society, in public institutions and in international donor agencies.

Secondly, the analysis aims at presenting a global and comparative perspective of women's political participation in the South-East Asian region with a view to identify the strategic partners in women's political participation for Spanish cooperation in the region, or those who are strategic partners due to their leading regional role or their existing or future possibilities.

Finally, this analysis pursues a very practical goal: to put together, in a single document, and to offer with detailed and complete information, providing theoretical, regulatory and methodological frameworks, the bibliographic and digital references that may guide other analytical processes or simply offer some ideas on political participation with a gender transforming perspective for those interested in the issue or in the region.

With these goals in mind, a prior comprehensive work has been carried out in order to set up a framework and methodological tools flexible enough to establish a homogeneous analysis and to adapt themselves to all contexts under analysis. An extensive search and an analysis of secondary sources were put in place, allowing a deeper understanding of each specific context and the identification of those providing the information and the key bodies in each country. The field work involved over 150 people who were interviewed from civil society organisations, government institutions and various official development aid actors working in the specific area of women's political participation in each of the 7 countries, in addition to all those who offered their support and help throughout the analytical process.

The analytical results by country in terms of women's political participation revealed the existence of different contexts with very complex dynamics determined by historical and cultural factors specific to each country and at a regional level. It found very dissimilar situations



with significant differences between one country and the next from the point of view of the achievements and advances for gender equality in terms of political participation and representation. Some countries, such as the Philippines, lead the region in this regard. It is the country with the highest human development and gender empowerment indicators in the region. Furthermore it has a wide and powerful women's movement with a long history and training centres specialising in gender studies. Women's participation levels in elections are higher than those of men and there are numerous mechanisms for the promotion of equality.

However, this regional leader should not live in the shade of the existence of significant initiatives and achievements in other countries. For instance, Bangladesh is the only country in the region with a representation quota in the national parliament and in the sub-national divisions. East Timor has the highest representation levels in the region for its national parliament and it is the one closest to the 30 per cent goal set by UNDP, and Indonesia is the only country with open voting lists. In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Women's Union is the most powerful and most developed women's organisation in the region. It has over 13 million members and it is present at all levels.

In terms of the common factors for limitation and empowerment, the summary and comparison work was strenuous due to the specific aspects of each context. The analysis aims at identifying the common barriers preventing women from participating in power structures and decision-making, which should represent the priority areas with regard to recommending actions in response to the needs of the actors involved with a view to reaching the goal of gender equality.

The first priority and strategic block has to do with the need in all the countries studied for significant regulatory and structural changes.

Measures for formal equality, such as quota systems or equality laws, help to formally establish political-legal decisions favouring women's rights and they serve as a reference model to support women's demands. And to achieve practical effectiveness, it is necessary to complement them with **mechanisms**

which promote women's presence in public spheres and in decision-making.

Legislative and structural changes for gender equality need an integral and global perspective. This involves **a gender sensitive approach, cross-cutting through all institutions and their policies.** In order to do so, institutions specialising in this issue must be created to implement and evaluate the public policies on gender equality with adequate economic and human resources (budgets and trained actors).

Likewise, with a view to including women in the political spectrum, countries must adopt **mechanisms ensuring women's access to positions of power.** Changes in electoral systems need to be planned toward proportional representation systems with open lists and women's representation quotas. It is also indispensable to include ways of financing electoral campaigns allowing women from the most disadvantaged environments and those far from the political elite to take part in the political game.

On the other hand, once they have gained access to the political spheres, women should be able to compete on equal terms for key decision-making positions with adequate conditions in place that ensure they can retain these positions. Other actions include: **mechanisms to control discrimination and violence against women in positions of power and the integration of their needs and interests.**

The second block refers to the need for encouraging changes in social attitudes regarding women's political participation.

In a repeated and general manner in all countries studied, **the burden of the patriarchal culture** and its endless ramifications in all aspects of life were seen as one of the main barriers to women's access to politics. On many occasions they go beyond the boundaries of social practices to settle themselves in the laws that regulate people's lives.

Changes in attitude require **extensive awareness programmes within a strategy of fighting against discrimination in the area of political participation and representation, designed for different levels and**



areas such as media, political parties, trade unions, public actors, schools, rural areas, etc. They should be addressed both to men and women in all age ranges. Furthermore, they should be placed within the cultural context of each society. Awareness programmes also need to focus on promoting a democratic culture among women, explaining the electoral processes, the voting systems, the political parties, etc.

And finally, the last strategic block identified was women's training and empowerment, **i.e. providing women with the necessary tools and resources so they can embrace their participation and representative power in an efficient and effective manner.** Having enough capacity to participate in politics is part of a learning and socialising process. This section must focus both on women who are already in power structures and decision-making positions, as well as on those who aspire to gain those positions, with special attention to rural women, young women, socially excluded women and minorities, offering them **training programmes on democratic governance.** To incorporate this section within a regional perspective, it is also important to **promote the creation of platforms, exchange, mutual support and pressure groups networks for women in civil society and women in power structures and decision-making positions.**

In fact, in order for women to be empowered, they need spaces where they are visible, can express themselves and can claim their rights. And, more importantly, they need areas where they can build alliances with other leading women or women aspiring to be leaders. Due to the specificity of the history of women's political participation in some countries in the region, it would be interesting to bring back those women who have been pioneering figures in gender equality and who may well become real and tangible models of leadership for today's women, especially the younger ones.

Finally, beyond recommending specific actions for each strategic block, we believe that a regional gender strategy developed by Spanish cooperation agencies should also pursue the following goals:

- 1 Reinforce international commitments in terms of gender equality (CEDAW, BPfA, MDGs) with objectives and schedules for realistic action, as well as implementation, monitoring and assessment mechanisms.
- 2 Encourage coordination between and with international organisations, especially those working on gender equality.
- 3 Find strategic partners in the region to lead regional programmes or projects, based on the areas established: they should be partners with strong existing possibilities, who may act as regional leaders or partners with future possibilities that aim to be strengthened or developed.
- 4 Elaborate and disseminate studies and regional analyses of women's political participation.
- 5 Harmonise Spanish Cooperation's regional policies and create effective cross-cutting mechanisms for gender approach in all strategies designed for each priority or special attention country.