Many paths to power: women in contemporary Asia *Irene Tinker*

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The women's movement, clearly the most influential social movement of the last century, has empowered women in most countries around the globe. By joining together, women at all levels of society are enhancing their capabilities, exerting their influence, and making their own decisions within their households and their communities. Utilizing this base of growing power and knowledge, many women are increasingly seeking seats in formal political institutions. However, the way women are wielding this growing power to build new societies varies widely and produces different patterns around the world. Such diversity arises from the cultural and religious characteristics of the societies in which they are embedded, as well as from the colonial and post-colonial economic and political systems of the countries in which they live.

Asia today illustrates the commonalities and diversity of women's paths to power. Given the broad and often contradictory trends among the countries and the ambivalent attitudes toward gender equality by women and men alike, any broad assessment of the region is impossible. Instead, to illustrate both the various approaches utilized by women's organizations and their achievements and problems, I have identified four distinct patterns that exist: in China, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Korea. In each area the underlying culture with its overlay of religion, colonialism, and governmental system limit the choices available to women. A template exists to assess empowerment by noting how women use their power: enhanced services –from water to health to education-- for their communities and families; greater opportunities for providing livelihood for themselves and their children; increased gender equality in household, community, and national decision-making; freedom from violence.

How women seek to achieve such goals varies, but increasingly they utilize women's organizations directly or indirectly to reach accomplish their objectives. National organizations often focus on legislation that would expand women's rights: to work, to divorce, to own land, to receive inheritance, and to give recourse to violence against them. But laws only indicate the direction of change which must come about through efforts of women themselves, uniting together. Their goals may be welfarist, but their methods require agency.[1] In early days of organizing, perhaps, agency was exhibited primarily by the elite leadership; but increasingly women at community levels are startling observers with their actions.[2] An analysis of these

paths provides explanations of the different ways women use power and suggests directions of their future empowerment.

Four Asian patterns

The context within which women's organizations function explains their diversity. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism originated in region; Islam and Christianity arrived before Columbus sailed to the New World. All have adapted to local cultures as they spread. The migration of peoples throughout Asia is complex and contested, but patterns persevere. Societies in Asia have traditionally been stratified and, despite their constitutions which grant equality to all women and men, class and caste distinctions persist along with patriarchal dominance. India and China historically embodied a patriarchy that did not value women. Separating these civilizations were mountains filled with migrant tribes whose subsistence activities promoted greater equality. From Ladakh through Nepal, Bhutan, and Burma these groups provide a different gender pattern which has spilled over into much of Southeast Asia. This pattern is characterized by greater gender equity in land ownership and in commercial activities.

Asia was also influenced, if not actually controlled, by a spectrum of colonial powers that imposed different values and governing systems. While the British were the dominant force in the region, France, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United States instituted their own colonial versions of society and commerce. Generally, the prevalent attitudes of the male expatriates reinforced existing patriarchal strictures. Colonial powers and missionaries also introduced western education for girls as well as boys, and so produced a cadre of elite women who became leaders in their countries' national movements. Most of these national movements were socially conservative; women involved in independence struggles did not make demands for change in women's social status (Jayawardene. 1986). Even where education was made compulsory, by the US in both the Philippines and South Korea and by the communist Party in China and Vietnam, women's activism was conditioned by culture and religion.

Post World War II Asia was a devastated region. Fighting continued in Indochina and Indonesia as nationalist battled the returning colonial powers; Britain and the United States set dates for independence of their former colonies. Famines plagued India that had been pushed further into turmoil by the Partition which created Pakistan. In China the communists defeated the nationalists, then spread their influence to neighboring countries. First in Korea, then in Vietnam and Laos, foreign troops joined the fray. Poverty was pervasive; governments

addressed the issues of food and of security in different ways. Most created Five Year Plans; in none of them was women's economic contribution recognized.

Present government systems in the various countries reflect both the colonial past and the education of the leaders. Thus a Fabian socialists in India have promoted greater gender equality through politics and planning. In contrast, the socialist leader in Indonesia, Dr. Sjahrir, brought back from Holland the emphasis on women as mothers, a view that continues to constrict women in Indonesia (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000). With the exception of communist countries, post-independence Asian countries preserved many elements of customary and family law which limited women's rights; yet even though new constitutions in the communist countries proclaimed women and men as equal, the gap between ideology and reality remained immense, especially in China (Li 1995). Efforts by contemporary women's organizations throughout the region are addressing these inequities in many imaginative ways that go beyond legal changes. In contrast, in China, Laos, and Vietnam, women are organizing to maintain their legal rights in the face of patriarchal resurgence as their economies open to market forces (Berry 1996; Tinker & Summerfield 1999).

A majority of women leaders are drawn from the educated elite who, in stratified societies, rank above men of lower caste or class (Jayawardena 1986 ; Kumar 1993). In many Asian countries elite women have had a history of organizing and even protest, though such activity was often part of broader social or political movements. What is new about women's empowerment today is its penetration to the community level in both rural and urban areas. Such change is a direct result of governmental efforts to modernize their economies. Hesitantly most government planning offices, pressured and funded by international assistance agencies, began to include women into the development process. Local and international nongovernmental organizations – often led by women– were instrumental in reaching poor women. Whatever the program goals, women were formed into groups. In many Asian societies the mobility of rural women has traditionally been extremely limited; and Asia was predominantly rural fifty years ago. Allowing, even requiring, these women to leave their household compounds for reasons other than work in the fields, and to meet together had an extraordinary impact of these isolated women. Women's agency came slowly, impelled by consciousness raising; the male decision makers seldom noticed (Sen 1999).

Once again outside influences affect national policies as international and bilateral development agencies with their packages of projects designed to achieve economic development. Too often such programs fail to differentiate among recipient countries or to adapt to local circumstances.

Such is usually the case when the goals relate to women because their status within each society is embedded, as we have stressed, in the religious and cultural practices and in the history of women's activism and education. Further, the priorities given by different countries among the palette of development programs – health, education, family planning, agriculture, industry, informal sector, credit, community development -- produced distinct patterns of modernization. The method of implementation and the strength or weakness of civil society contributed to these very different patterns.

As women have been incorporated into development planning at the community level, elite women became involved both in these efforts and in the burgeoning global women's movement that was facilitated and sustained by the United Nations world conferences on women beginning in Mexico City in 1975.[3] Rapid economic transformation dislocates societies; changing women's roles have often produced a backlash from male leadership as women's traditional subservience vanishes. Male leaders in many countries have conflated nationalism with a return to tradition that privileges male dominance. Vina Mazumdar finds that such anti-modern efforts are based on "a romanticized view of that traditional culture that is often quite divorced from historical reality. When played off against the negative consequences of Western-style development, however, such romantic images have power appeal" (1995:19). Many Asian women themselves are challenging modernization paradigms and the values that support them. These leaders are utilizing the concepts of women's equal rights while also inventing new institutions for economic fairness and promoting new approaches to family and community that they believe are more appropriate to their cultures and values.

Korea: family planning and universal education

When Japan surrendered to the US in 1945, the Japanese occupation of Korea was at an end. But after communism triumphed in China, communist adherents in the northern part of Korea took over the government and invaded the south. United Nations troops joined the US government in fighting the invasion and secured peace in a divided peninsula. The Japanese had reinforced the existing Confucian patriarchal system, impressed Korean men as workers in Japan, and seized many unmarried women for service as comfort women. The nationalist movement that arose was therefore not directed against European nations or the US.

The cessation of hostilities in South Korea found a small country ravaged by the war, houses were destroyed in both rural and urban areas, the land was nearly devoid of tress, and farming was still largely subsistence. For many years the Korean military governed the country with the complicity of the US. Authoritarian political rule was reenforce by Confucian tradition that made

women subservient to men, and men to rulers. To promote rapid economic transformation, the government determined to reduce population growth and create an educated workforce. Both policies altered the traditional lives of women in Korea.
To carry out efforts at birth control, adult women were formed into Mother's Clubs which met monthly to receive their allocation of birth control pills. All women of the village were required to attend. Dispensing the pills were educated urban women who imparted much more than pills as they taught the women about health and sanitation, and spoke about current events. These clubs responded to the government pleas for tree nurseries in order to reforest the hillsides. Some clubs not only sold the seedlings but planted trees as well. Profits were used by the members as a group. Imagine the liberating emotions of a compound-restricted woman who suddenly has the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage to a Buddhist shrine on a train![4]

The emphasis on reduced family size was a success: the fertility rate fell from 6 children per woman in 1960 to 1.6 in 1990. But pills are not widely used because those available in the 1960s produced many side effects because of their hormonal strength. Female sterilization is the primary method used; abortion is also high. Recently, ability to predict the sex of a fetus has resulted in a higher ratio of boys to girls born; this male preference is more pronounced after families already have daughters (Hampden 2000). Thus perversely, the ability of women to control their fertility has reinforced patriarchy, at least temporarily.[5] But the organizing of women opened worlds for women to explore, particularly as the country rapidly urbanized: 28% of the population was urban in 1960, 75% in 1990.

Government efforts to create an educated workforce began with the 1948 constitution which introduced universal education. Girls had to attend school and so were no longer available to help their mothers with the onerous chores of rural subsistence living -- a trend that encouraged urbanization. This literate work force of young women became the foundation of later industrial development despite lower pay than men and deplorable working conditions in many factories. In the 1980s spontaneous rebellions began to break out in free export zones where unions were prohibited (Kim 1992). Despite government support for industrialization, reality in the factories was chilly because women were called by derogatory terms by men; once married most were required, and usually anxious, to leave and become a dependent housewife. By the late 1980s, active lobbying by Korean women's groups led to Equal Employment Act; but the intent of this progressive law was subverted by tradition (Hampden 2000).

Similarly, access to education for women has had mixed benefits. In-ho Lee complains that without women in educational administration and curriculum development, education has

stressed conformity so that an inverse relationship exists between the level of education and workforce participation (1993). For university graduates, few opportunities are available, especially after the 1998 economic crisis. Many families still see higher education for women as a means to attract a higher status husband (Hampden 2000).

Women's activism Korea's constitution, drafted under American tutelage, granted women equality -- as did most constitutions of newly independent countries, without any significant demand for this privilege. Previous women's activism was related to nationalist struggles or to rights for practicing Christianity which challenged the Confucian order (Jayawardena 1986). The contemporary women's movement in Korea came, according to In-ho Lee, "from imported academic feminism and the political context of grass roots demands to secure basic human rights.." (1993:98). During the 1970s the focus of women's movement was on improving the situation of women in factories. As more women's groups appeared, the government set up Special Commission on Women under the prime minister and created a Women's Development Institute. Judged ineffectual by women activists, the Institute did offer employment to university educated women who wanted to work; studies that emerged fueled the emerging advocacy groups. To gain greater visibility, these groups, in 1989, formed the Korean Women's Associations United and helped ensure the passage of the Family Law Act in Dec 1989. The law finally brings family law under the constitutional provision of equality by granting women equal inheritance rights and provides for courts to decide custody rights of the parents. Efforts to mitigate the oppressive nature of customary practice took over three decades, a effort spearheaded by Lee Tai Young, a lawyer and founder of the Legal Aid Center for Family Rights soon after independence.

Women's power in Korea is still constrained by Confucian beliefs and traditional practices. The rapid economic transformation of the country from subsistence agriculture to an industrial urban nation did not purposefully liberate women. Cracks in patriarchal control began slowly with the Mother's Clubs but it was the plight of industrial workers that brought international activists to Korea to work on their behalf. Educated women, activated by international contacts and women's studies curriculum, organized rights groups that addressed Korean specific inequities. Their role in formal political institutions remains minimal although since the election of President Kim Dae Jung two women were appointed ministers in the government and In-ho Lee became the first female ambassador, to Russia. Hampden concludes: "The greatest influence women have on the political decision-making process derives from the activities of pressure groups that have effectively mobilised public opinion on women's issues" (2000: 182).

South Asia: divergent paths to organizing local women

South Asia as a region was conditioned by nearly two centuries of British colonialism. Its society is still highly stratified as a result of the influence of the Hindu caste system which has also permeated both Islam and Buddhism as locally practiced. Many elite women and men were educated in English schools and adopted some of the values of the west, particularly regarding law and governance. While the British granted independence to the sub-continent following World War II, only Sri Lanka escaped riots and killing as India was partitioned into two countries. The remote Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim had been under different forms of British control which India assumed. Only Sikkim has been integrated into the India state.

Women in contemporary India are active in a panoply of organizations that encompass dam building, land and forest rights, pavement dwellers, home-based workers, wife-burning, and much more. Their skills have been honed by nearly two centuries of involvement, first in efforts to reform Hinduism and then in the nationalist movement that demanded independence from Britain (Kumar 1993). Early women leaders represented the growing middle class whose members were drawn from the three upper castes; they sought western education as well as reforms of cultural practices such as *sati*, child marriage, and a ban of widow remarriage.[6] Some "modernist" Muslims supported education for Muslim women despite the prevalence of purdah, or the seclusion of women (Jahan 1995:91). Schools for girls in Sri Lanka were first started under the Dutch, then renewed by the British, in both vernacular and English languages (Jayawardene 1986). In all these countries, education of women was stressed, not to create a equal citizens but to help women fulfill their roles of wife and mother in a household headed by western educated men (Desai 1995). Thus schooling for girls emphasized domestic skills and generally stopped at puberty.[7]

By the end of the nineteenth century, South Asian men were enrolling in British universities; soon women followed. Study in England exposed women to the wide range of civil society organizations; on their return some started their own associations with both political and social goals. In 1926, the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was formed to provide a nation-wide platform for women. By 1930, groups demanding improved working conditions for women workers in textiles factories and mines convinced the AIWC to hold a special session on labor practices. But generally, these elite women emphasized religious reform, education, and suffrage that were of most concern to their own classes. Commenting on this history of women's participation, Jayawardene writes that "The most revealing aspect has been the essential

conservatism of what on the surface seemed like radical change...women were kept within the structural confines of family and society" (1986:107).

Critical in changing these prevailing attitudes of organized women in South Asia was the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. He questioned many of the values of industrialization, and did so by wearing khadi, or homespun cloth; he lived in villages and among the untouchables and Muslims, countering caste and religious taboos; and he reached out to the entire country with his non-violent protests against the British. Muslim and Hindu women and men, many from abroad, joined Gandhi in his ashram.[8] In the spring of 1930, Mahatma Gandhi launched a salt satyagraha to protest a government tax on salt: women and men walked to the Gujerat coast and began illegally to make salt (Kumar 1993). The photographs of Indian women being arrested in this and subsequent protests helped create sympathy in Britain for Indian independence. Throughout the 1930s, as demands for self-government escalated, many Indian women withdrew from leading women's groups and focused on non-violent protests. Experiences in jail converted many of these women into strong political figures who took leadership roles in independent India. Equally important, Gandhi's legacy gave moral legitimacy to women and men for working with the poor.

As possibilities for the end of British rule grew, so did communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims.[9] In the AIWC, Muslim women formed their own groups and by 1944 had withdrawn entirely from its membership. Although both India and Pakistan declared themselves secular and passed bills to improve women's rights, because the reason for Pakistan's existence was Islam, religious conservatives grew in power in Pakistan and by 1977 the Islamization of the country had begun. Prior to that time, citizens in East Pakistan had began protesting repressive military actions and their treatment as a colony of West Pakistan. In 1971, the province fought for their own country; the new constitution of Bangladesh granted women equal rights in the public sphere (Jahan 1995).

Independence and economic development In independent India, women formed new types of organizations to support women's equality as enshrined in the constitution. The country was suffering from destruction both from World War II and the Partition that created Pakistan out of British India; famines seemed endemic. International agencies poured economic development funds into the country, promoting a paradigm that rendered most women's work invisible (Kabeer 1994; Tinker 1990). In response, women founded both research centers and activist groups to address the often detrimental impact of development programs on poor rural women (Jain 1995; Mazumdar 1995). Women's work in subsistence agriculture and household

production was documented; the appropriate technology movement designed small machines such as grinding mills to alleviate drudgery and promoted new cookstoves; to introduce such innovations, women had to be persuaded. Like the community development policies which were designed to increase agricultural production and improve health status in the villages, changes from traditional practices did not work without the inclusion of women. Caste and patriarchal dominance in these villages required the setting up of separate women's groups if women were to participate in the development projects.

Once organized, such groups took on issues of local concern from setting up income producing activities to growing their own fodder for cattle on land they fenced off from cattle of better off villagers. The emergence of the Chipko movement, women in the Himalayan foothills who hugged trees to prevent their harvesting, documented the negative consequences of rapid economic growth not only on the poor, but also on the environment. Recognizing the indigenous knowledge of such women about the sustainable uses of field and forest, women have organized to support traditional agricultural practices in Ladakh, and elsewhere (Angeles & Tarbotton 2001), against high dams that would deprive many peasants of their land, and against "biopiracy" of golden rice or the neem tree (Shiva 2001). In Bihar, local women organized to obtain land in their own names (Agarwal 1994).

Increased radio and television coverage of such events spread the word, and soon spontaneous groups of village women arose protesting local inequities. Women in hill tribes in Maharashtra shamed husbands who beat their wives by banging kitchen pots outside the offending man's house. Dalit (formerly called untouchable) women joined with devadasis (temple dancers) to protest the dedication of girls to serve in temples as "brides" of the gods – a sort of sanctioned prostitution. In central India local women challenged government sanctioned toddy shops because cheap liquor was increasing domestic violence while encouraging their husbands to spend their paychecks on the liquor; the shops were closed (Verghese 1997).

In cities, women earning livelihoods as vendors or home-based workers were organized into the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmedabad (Jhabvala 1994) and in Madras (Chennai) in the Working Women's Forum.[10] These large organizations, which support urban and rural poor women, were started and led by charismatic women. In contrast, similar groups in Bangladesh, Grameen Bank and BRAC, were started by and continue to be run primarily by men.[11] In Sri Lanka the major early community development organization, Sarvodaya, was also headed by a man. While the empowering effect of forming women into groups is similar, the lack of women in provincial and central positions illustrates the different trajectories taken in

South Asia outside India and may be traced to the influence of the Gandhian movement that encouraged elite women to work with the poor.[12] Men trained in the Gandhian tradition worked with rural poor in both Pakistan and Sri Lanka; but their organizations, like that of Gandhi's, remained largely patriarchal (Jain 1978). Increasingly, however, women's organizations in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka[13] are forming women-only organizations themselves to work with the urban and rural poor. In India, women activists, legitimized by the Gandhian tradition to work with the poor, were emboldened by the women in development movement to work toward women's empowerment under female leadership.

Parallel efforts for women's rights In all the countries of South Asia, elite women continued their efforts to reform religious limitations on women's equality that had been guaranteed by their constitutions when secular leadership was dominant In India, violence against women was the roots of campaigns directed against alcohol, the rape of lower caste and tribal women by landlords and police, and wife burning (Verghese 1997). These abominations occurred among all groups in the society and women of all religions and castes joined efforts to eliminate them. Over time, however, more conservative elements, both Muslim and Hindu, began to influence politics. This trend was evident when, in the mid-1980s, a Muslim woman sued for support payments under civil law and the courts gave precedence to Muslim family law, effectively removing Muslim women from many protections in the constitution. The rights of Hindu women were challenged by the *sati* , widow immolation, in Rajasthan which appeared to be more like a murder than self-sacrifice (Kumar 1993 & 1995; Ganguly-Scrase 2000). During the 1990s and continuing today, increased communal violence has underscored the range of political and social views held by women as well as men. Identity politics led scholars to deconstruct the categorization of an Indian woman as an urban middle-class Brahmin. "The deep class and caste divisions in Indian society have inhibited the emergence of a unified feminist movement" (Ganguly-Scrase 2000:9; see also Sharma1996). But women are making their voices heard throughout the social, political, and religious spectrum; diverse groups took these issues to the Fourth UN Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (Anand with Salvi 1998).

In Pakistan, nationalism has led to a resurgent Islam that continues to contend with the modernist educated classes; most active women are both modernist and upper-class creating a chasm between their lives and those of the largely illiterate poor whom the educational system does not serve (Shaheed & Mumtaz 1995). The women's movement was energized and radicalized by the *Hudood* Ordinances put in place by the military regime of General Zia ul-Haq in 1979 to placate religious extremists. These ordinances superceded laws inherited from the British and enforced traditional Islamic punishments for adultery, rape, prostitution, etc. Bari and Khattak record the

difficulties of the largely middle class movement to challenge issues of family law, especially when they are seldom affected by extreme application. Rather, they argue, that the present women's movement in Pakistan "engages with the state to negotiate increased space and rights for women in the public and private arena through affirmative actions but not through direct political activism via party politics" (2001:217).

Instead of directly confronting family issues, many women leaders have set up or work with NGOs that are largely foreign funded to reach out to poor rural and urban women with programs about political empowerment, reproductive rights, and violence against women (Weiss 1997). Terming this flow of talent the "NGOization of the women's movement," Bari and Khattak conclude that these increased services must be weighed against the undermining of the movement's independence (2001: 238). The ability of NGOs to provide services is questioned by Renken who noted that a majority of microfinance programs funded middle and upper class women, not the poor (2001). But Weiss argues that promoting microcredit in the walled city of Lahore has empowered women (Weiss 1996).

The Bangladesh women's movement gained legitimacy on "visible and significant participation in the war for liberation in 1971 and the movement for democratization in 1980s" (Jahan 1995:104).
Women's NGOs at first were research based; more recently some have begun social outreach programs that mirror those of BRAC and the Grameen Bank, and broadening their membership. Perhaps because men run those and other similar organizations and are working toward women's empowerment, the issue of western influence within the women's movement is seldom raised. Women do have to contend with the Jamaat party which promotes radical Islam and has encouraged attacks on NGO staff and beneficiaries. Citing the growing strength and solidarity of the women's movement in Bangladesh, Jahan calls the prevailing mood as one of cautious optimism (1995).

In Sri Lanka, feminists started a Center for Women's Research to focus on issues of concern to women. The Mahaweli irrigation scheme found that women were unable to benefit from loan programs if their husband's had defaulted on an agricultural loan. These women lived in the same area where the government was encouraging export production village programs. In 1987 the Women's Chamber of Commerce started the Agromart Foundation to support such activities as exportation of ornamental tropical fish and cardamom.[14] While these income activities did not alter gender relations, according to Samarasinghe, women in the program increased their self-confidence and had become more self-reliant (1993).

Electoral politics The rising force of women organized at all levels of society throughout the world has given greater impetus to the 30% target for women in political positions originally promoted in 1995. Introducing quotas for electoral seats is considered an important strategy.[15] The low representation of women in national assemblies contrasts with the number of prominent women political leaders in the region. In Bangladesh the heads of the two major, and intensely competitive, parties are women. Both have served as the prime minister, neither espouse feminist causes, and both come from political dynasties: Khaleda Zia is a widow of an assassinated prime minister; Sheikh Hasena is the daughter of a nationalist leader. When Benazir Bhutto, daughter of another martyred prime minister, was in power in Pakistan, her ability to ameliorate the *Hudood* was circumscribed, but she supported women in their preparations for Beijing. Indira Gandhi, as India's prime minister, kept aloof from the feminist movement; after her assassination her son Rajvi became prime minister; after he was also killed, his wife Sonia –albeit an Italian by birth– was made head of the Congress Party and is being groomed for high office should the party win the elections. Sri Lanka is unique in having had both mother and daughter as leaders: Sirimavo Bandaranaika, the widow of an assassinated prime minister, was the first woman prime minister in the world. Her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaika Kumaratunga is Sri Lanka's president but was also a prime minister; her husband was also assassinated. The dynastic succession is obvious. The reason these elite women could replace male relatives as their countries' leaders is due to class/caste identity and strong personalist politics in the region. Women's issues are certainly not privileged by such woman leaders; indeed, the strength of the women's movement is irrelevant.

With independence, the Indian constitutions recognized the intractability of the caste system by providing for representation of disadvantage peoples though a system that reserved specific constituencies for Scheduled Castes [untouchables or *dalits*] and Scheduled Tribes[16] based on their population.[17] Since many women prominent in the nationalist struggle were elected, no special provisions were deemed necessary at the time.[18] Current women leaders, noting that the percentage of women members in Parliament has averaged 5 % since independence (Kalyani-Sen & Kumar 2001), have agitated for a quota without success (Kumud 1998). While upper class women have had some representation in elective bodies, this was not the case in local elections for elective bodies at the village, county, and district levels of government when they were set up in the 1960s. This situation was changed by laws passed in 1993 requiring panchayats at all three levels to reserve one-third of their electoral constituencies for women. Furthermore, one third of all panchayats must elect a woman as chair. These quotas are achieved by rotation of constituencies and of electoral bodies. To date over one million women have been

elected to local bodies. The southern state of Karnataka actually has 46.7 per cent women members, an indication that women ran for general as well as for reserved seats.[19]

To assist these new legislators to understand their power and responsibilities many women's organizations have begun training courses for them. Activists at the local levels are generally impressed with the visible results of women in the panchayats (Burch 2000), but skepticism is widespread among many feminists who question the ability of these women to understand the workings of the panchayats or to take positions independent of their husbands (Ganguly-Scrase 2000). Srilatha Batliwala agrees with some skeptics who believe that quotas are "so much window-dressing and political gimmickry...in a narrow sense" but argues that such critics miss the potential that such participation has "to empower women and transform traditional gender relations" (1997:5).

In sum, women's movements in the four South Asian countries discussed have at the very least been able to influence their governments for changes in women's rights.[20] Their access to officials is facilitated by their membership in the modernist upper class. Many women in these countries have begun to work with women of other classes though class, class, and religion seriously impede the emergence of a more unified movement. Gradually poor women in both India and Bangladesh are becoming empowered by development projects that reached to the village or community levels and organized them. This process in Sri Lanka was arrested by the years of ethnic conflict and in Pakistan by the increasing power of conservative Islam.

Southeast Asia: a more egalitarian society

The Hindu-Buddhist religions that expanded throughout the region left behind a status hierarchy that put the rulers, their armies, and the priests at the top. Commerce was less valued, and largely left to women or foreigners. More recent overlay of Islam and Christianity have not undercut this ranking although in Malaysia the Chinese filled the entrepreneurial niche as a conservative Islam was encouraging women to stay at home. Such displacement did not happen throughout Indonesia because Hindu-Bali beliefs have intertwined with Islam in much of Java. But in contemporary times, women in Indonesia have not achieved the same level of prominence as entrepreneurs as have women in the Philippines and Thailand, perhaps because of the government sponsored campaign to keep women at home which has encouraged upperclass women to participate in social uplift activities through government related women's organizations (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000). Less well off women in Indonesia continue to work as do most women in both Thailand and the Philippines.[21]

Colonial policies in the region influenced women's educational opportunities. In the Philippines, the UN introduced public schools throughout the country in the early 1900s which has resulted

in a 95% adult literacy rate for both women and men in 1998, (UN 2000), with over one half of all students completing elementary school, a quarter finish high school. Torres argues that in terms of gender stereotypes, the new system did not "intrude on the value of male *machismo"* embedded in the culture by four centuries of Spanish rule, but rather reinforced it (1995:107). Reflecting this emphasis on family, women who complete the university and graduate programs at higher rates than for men tend to dominate medical science (87%) , food and nutrition (99%), and commerce (67%) -- nurturing professions and trading (Torres 1995:110). The abundance of women with college degrees and the lack of appropriate jobs, especially outside of Metro Manila, encourages women to join NGOs, if they can afford it, or to become self-employed. A study of street food vendors in Ilo Ilo found that 92% of the enterprises were headed by women; further 20% of these vendors had college degrees (Tinker 1997).

Women dominate the street food trade in Thailand as well, running 88% of the enterprises; women's adult literacy rate is 93%. In Indonesia, under the Dutch, education was limited and students were taught in Dutch above the elementary level. Only engineering and medicine were taught at university level in the country. After independence, the trading language Malay was adopted as the national language requiring new textbooks at all grades. Today women's adult literacy rate is 81%. The rapid expansion of the entire education system has allowed women and men to study, but shortages of teachers and books continues to be a problem. Women continue to be prominent in the batik industry even under pressure from larger industry (Joseph 1997).

In all three countries, women are expected to help support their families. In rural areas the lower income women work in agriculture, in cities they are engaged in small or micro enterprise. Young women often work in export industries that locate where women are educated. The income that women earn gives them status and relative independence (Wolf 1992), though women who sub-contract are frequently exploited (Lazo 1996). In Thailand and in the Philippines, many women were drawn into the sex industry in response to large numbers of US troops and to the special package tours from Japan and Germany. Local women organized against US bases in the Philippines, and found international support that led to the down-sizing or closing of these installations.

Organizing women Three factors slowed the development of local women's local organizations in Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. First was the perception by most women of the region that there was gender equity: women accepted the division of labor within which they had considerable independence. Divorce is uncommon in the Philippines and Thailand, though concubinage/mistresses are widely acknowledged, perhaps giving wives more latitude. Most

middle class women are involved in social service organizations that assist the poor; these groups are more likely to focus on societal issues such as housing, human rights, or the environment. Until recently, few groups addressed more feminist issues relating to family law or violence. Only as exploitation of women in export factories and the abuse of Philippine and Thai women working in Japan, did specifically women's issues appear (Roces 2001).

Secondly, authoritarian governments in all three countries inhibited the growth of NGOs. In Indonesia, where women had been organized as part of the nationalist movement, women were "valorized" as mothers and wives (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000). Under President Suharto, women's organizations were absorbed into the government under the control of the Ministry of Home Affairs (Robinson 2001). Women's groups outside the officially sanctioned ones –known as GONGO or government organized NGOs- were viewed with suspicion. Activist women gravitated to environment and consumer organizations which were considered safe topics, and women headed several influential organizations (Ibrahim 1996; Tinker 1996)

As the democratization movements grew in all three countries, women joined with men in more overtly oppositional activities (Silliman & Nobel 1997; Walker 1996; Pongsapich 1994). In all three countries the oppositional NGOs were instrumental in the overthrow of regimes and the replacement with more democratic governments; spontaneous protests led by women over high prices of basic foodstuffs precipitated more general student strikes (Oey-Gardiner & Bianpoen 2000; Robinson 2002).

Political participation Women in the Philippines have wielded power for many years indirectly through important men; Imelda Marcos was so powerful that she had her own ministry while the mistress of President Ramos had both visibility and influence. Cory Aquino became president after her husband was assassinated; Gloria Macapagal, daughter of a revolutionary leader, became president in 2001 when the President Estrada was impeached. A 1986 law to limit terms has resulted in some wives replacing their husbands, but many wives have sought political office on their own. Roces concludes "Organized power is still very much the domain of men" (2001: 120). Indonesia has also seen the succession to president of a daughter of the first Indonesian president with Megawati Sukarnoputri. Her election had earlier been blocked by conservative Muslims who objected to having a woman heading the government. The elevation of women relatives as symbols has no more to do with women's issues in Southeast Asia than in South Asia.

The opening of political space for oppositional NGOs in the Philippines resulted in an rapid expansion of women's organizations during the 1980s, prior to that many groups focused on

kinship politics even as they dispensed charity. After the overthrown of Marcos, major women's groups, under the umbrella organization GABRIELA, became more feminist in nature. Roces argues, however, that except for nuns, women organizing outside the narrow construct of kinship politics are marginalized (Roces 122-3, 35). Such groups are often sustained by networks with groups in other countries: ISIS publishes its Asian journal from the Manila and HomeNet, organizing home-based women workers, has enrolled 20,000 members in the country (Carr et al 2000).

The 1997 elections in Indonesia was the first time women's issues were discussed. Middle-class women, both secular and Islamist, have started many overtly feminist organizations that have raised issues of domestic violence, marriage law, and the conditions of women workers. Since then, the tumultuous events revolving around the survival of democratic government have preempted focused action on revising the model of women promoted under Suharto, but "The reform of gender relations is very much on the agenda of contemporary Indonesia" (Robinson 2001:164).

Dismantling communist control in China, Laos, Vietnam

When the socialist governments were set up in Vietnam, Laos and China, equal right were nominally granted to women, though scholars have pointed to discrepancies in gender treatment throughout the communist era in all the three countries due to persistent patriarchal values and attitudes Edwards 2000; Unger 2000). Over the past decade, as leaders in all three countries have issued economic reforms designed to open their economies to the market economy, inevitable gender disparities that accompany rapid socio-economic change are eroding both achieved and theoretical equality.

For example, the countries decided to give land rights to the people though ownership remains with the state. Even though laws provide for land to be registered in the names of both women and men, women often see no reason for registering. Several international NGOs in Vietnam encouraged women to register in order to document their rights in case of divorce or death. In Laos the government sent teams to the countryside to talk to women about registering land especially among the lowland Lao who have matriarchal inheritance. These women did not comprehend that they might not have their traditional rights to land. Under the new laws, equal rights are ineffective if women do not put their names on the documents. Registration for urban housing was a somewhat different issue. Housing had been predominantly provided through the work unit of the husband so that privatizing living quarters often deprived the wife of security of tenure in the case of divorce. In China, women were sometimes allowed to share the tiny

housing space —diving the room with a blanket– for a year while they searched for alternative accommodation (Tinker & Summerfield 1999). Women researchers have publicized these problems, but the lack of locally led women's organizations means that appeals must be made to the government.

Mass organizations In communist Asia, workers, women, veterans, etc., each had a separate organization for representation and for control. Today, women continue to be elected to legislatures through women's mass organizations: Women's Union in Vietnam and Laos, Women's Federation in China. In interviews, women in these organizations are often dismissed as having less power than women in the regular party hierarchy. Historically such mass organizations usually functioned as a vehicle for the party to instruct the village women; Carol Ireson argues that in Laos, however, women's concerns were sometimes filtered upwards as well (1996). Today, with the vast amount of development assistance flowing to poor women through both the Vietnam Women's Union and the Laos Women's Union and the subsequent training to the cadres in order to implement new programs, the status of union members has been considerably improved (Edwards 2000; Unger 2000; Tinker & Summerfield 1999).

Yet without a strong voice of women's organizations outside the government, women's concerns are those assigned by the party; but the mass women's organizations are beginning to challenge the narratives[22] and policies in these countries. Communist regimes do not allow organizing outside party structures. In communist Europe, women had not organized as women and often rejected the concept of a woman's movement as U.S. propaganda. Even today in Laos, Vietnam, and China, restrictions continue on types of organizations acceptable to the party. Professional groups are accepted, but organizations whose goals are to help others, not its own membership, are generally forbidden because social provisioning is the right and responsibility of the government. In Laos and Vietnam, where foreign assistance has focused on organizing poor women for microcredit schemes, international nongovernmental organizations are allowed to promote their programs but only through a official institution such as the Women's Union, universities, or research centers.

In Vietnam, in 1998, only two NGOs run by local citizens groups could be identified by the Ford Foundation as offering assistance to the poor. Both group s are registered under the 1992 decree 35 that allows scientists to set up groups outside the government for social purposes; and neither accepted foreign funding which might make them seem foreign agents in the minds of suspicious bureaucrats. In 1993, a retired female medical doctor whose speciality is gynecology had set up clinics in two villages with a population of 17,000. Her clinic emphasizes educating women

about reproductive health and contraception. Because the major problem in these villages is poverty, she uses locally grown medicinal herbs when possible, and collaborates with the Women's Union which she considers "still political." She subsidizes her village work through a private clinic in Hanoi. The second independent program was set up by a man long experienced in working with an international NGO. He earns money for the work by consulting with foreign NGOs, then invests those funds in programs whose design he believes will correct errors made by many of the naive foreign efforts. He trains young volunteers who, like Peace Corps volunteers, receive minimal pay.[23]

These two organizations may predict the future of civil society organizations in Vietnam; today they are constrained by law and party to provide social service activities. However, even the officially organized microcredit groups I visited were receiving information as well as funding from the international NGO sponsors. Through research projects and international contacts with women's centers and local research organizations, the global discourse on women's rights is gradually filtering through to women working in government run universities, research centers, and the Women's Union; the internet is expensive but controls are sporadic. Vietnamese women travel abroad to attend international conferences and to study. A growing network of women exist to influence and instruct policy on women. But as with women in the Philippines, most educated women in both Vietnam and Laos feel they have equity and are not yet engaged in feminist issues, while poor women are working hard to survive. But as rapid economic transformation erodes traditional family support mechanisms, women are beginning to realize the need for actions to maintain their status in the society.

In China, feminist issues that were slowly seeping in were given greater visibility by the UN World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995 despite the government attempts as censorship. As the conference preparations were underway, a Journal *Rural Women Knowing All* was started to inform farm women of their rights as internal migration often left them to run the farms alone. Wu Qing, recent recipient of the Magsaysay award, helped start a hot line in Beijing; today over 200 such hot lines exist (Crook et al 1995). While there is no network among them, the volunteers running them all know each other and refer problems back and forth (personal communication 2001).

Conclusion

Women's power in Asia today is growing from the community level to national and international women leaders in each country. Despite an historic disconnect between the village women and the educated elite, development projects and the global women's movement are providing an

agenda that reaches all levels. To date, women's voices have seldom been heard in elected bodies even with quotas and reservations. Thus influence on legislation and policy is more likely to occur through media campaigns or lobbying than by standing for office. International networking, through the United Nations but also through development agencies including NGOs and the World Bank, adds to the pressure on decision makers to respond.

India has by far the most active women's movements at all levels of society, but feminist have not yet been able to achieve a cohesive national organization. Philippines has organizations of working women that exist outside the older women's organizations with their kinship/charity outlook. Throughout this part of Asia, educated women are articulate in global discussions and meetings about the need for recasting gender relationships. Their personal power in the family is often more egalitarian than the traditional stereotypes but legally they are often vulnerable. Women are walking on many paths to power, changing relationships within the family and community are palpable, but national power is elusive – but growing– in societies with strong patriarchal dominance of political institutions.

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ENDNOTES:

[1].A spirited debate exists on this topic between those who see programs to assist women to survive as welfarist and practical as opposed to strategic, ie those programs designed to change women's status. See for example Maxine Molyneux 1985; Caroline Moser 1993. Naila Kabeer 1994 suggests that practical needs are an important precondition for women to have time to empower themselves. Amartya Sen (1997) believes that the objectives of the women's movement have evolved from an emphasis on well-being to one stressing agency, but argues that the two approaches overlap and that the same person can be both agent and patient. I have long argued that development programs that bring women together, whether for microfinance or family planning, may also empower women by the very fact of getting them out of patriarchal households. See Tinker 1990.

[2].Jamila Verghese (1997) chronicles actions by dalits, devadasis, village women, and panchayat members who organized for their own diverse goals.

[3].For a basic review of the movement that persuaded the development community to include women see Tinker 1990; for accounts of their own roles in this effort written by international women leaders, see Fraser & Tinker, forthcoming.

[4]. In 1979 and 1980 I undertook two extensive research trips to South Korea, one sponsored by the World Bank, the other by a Korean research institute. My assignment in both cases was to chronicle the changing roles of women in that country. My understanding was largely gained from previously unrecognized women scholars in that country whose research documented my observations. See Tinker 1980, 1981.

[5].For conflicting views of the impact of declining male-female ratios that are widening as a result of selection abortion on women's status in Korea, China, and India, see Das Gupta & Li, and also Sudha & Rajan in Rasavi 2000.

[6]. Reactions by conservative Hindus to such reforms underlies much of contemporary Indian politics as the struggle continues about whether India is or is not a secular state.

[7].The education of women to be housewives to men chosen for them continues today as illustrated in generational life stories of women in India and Pakistan in Sizoo 1997; Ela Bhatt biography shows her determination to continue her studies and to choose her own husband (Jyotsna. 2000).

[8]. Details about Indian women activists in this struggle may be found in Kumar 1993; foreign women who joined Gandhi are discussed in Jayawardena 1995.

[9].Communal differences were exacerbated by the electoral system for members of the legislature: separate lists of representatives were elected by separate lists of voters. As tensions grew, the more radical politicians were the most successful. A system of reservations for different groups, as adopted in the 1950 Indian Constitution, combined voters of various groups thus promoting moderate candidates.

[10].Volumes have deservedly been written about SEWA and its modest but forceful founder Ela Bhatt. SEWA's trade union model of organizing by income activity was combined with community outreach to provide the basis for global organizing of home-based workers under the network Women in Informal Economy: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). WIEGO celebrated its fifth year with a meeting in Ahmedabad, India, headquarters of SEWA.

Much less has been written about WWF or its founder Jaya Arunchalam. As a politician, Jaya organized women as a constituency, combining castes into each group. Helzi Napone, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on WWF has told me of her experiences; I visited WWF in 1997.

[11]. The Grameen Bank is one of the studied organizations doing development work. Helen Todd (1996) interviewed active bank members while living in a village. BRAC is less well know but Martha Chen (1983) presents a history of its efforts.

[12]. Not all women were comfortable working in villages. In 1952 the female students in New Delhi objected to the requirement in a sociology class that they do field work by living in a village.

[13]. Sri Lanka has produced many fewer articles about women, perhaps because of the civil unrest that has consumed the country for more than a decade. I was resident in the country for five months in 1988 and interviewed many women activists.

[14].Field interviews, 21-14 May 1989.

[15].Quotas were enforced in the former Soviet Union; as the countries move toward democracy these quotas have been dropped. Critics noted the women elected were tightly controlled by the party and introduced no feminist issues.

[16].These two groups exist outside of and therefore below the four castes, and continue to be disadvantaged despite growing political representation. Women in these groups are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, often the focus of sexual violence.

[17].Appointed seats in the upper house of Parliament were available for representatives of arts and culture. Ela Bhatt held such a seat which enabled her to set up a National Commission on Self- Employed Women in the Informal Section, to hold hearings throughout the country, and to produce a White Paper on the topic in 1987 called *Shram shakti.*

[18]. "Criminalisation" of the parties is viewed by commentators in both India (Sharma 1998; Verghese 1997) and Pakistan (Weiss & Bari 2002) as the reason for few women in Parliament: they don't want anything to do with dirty politics.

[19].Punjab has the lowest representation of women with 29. 7 per cent. 18 panchayats have only women members: 9 in Maharashtra, 7 in Madhya Pradesh, and one each in West Bengal and in Tripura (Devadas 1999).

[20]. Nepal and Bhutan, buffer states to Tibet and China, have emerged from years of isolation only in the last forty years. Both countries continue to be dominated by kings, but with contrasting results. The massacre of Nepal's royal family in 2001 and the continued Maoist inspired rebellion contrast with the honored status of Bhutan's benevolent kingdom. Women status is high among hill tribes in both counties, but in Nepal this position has been compromised by Hinduism. International NGOs have been extremely active in Nepal, and have sponsored women's organizations and community representation. Women in Bhutan see little need for such outside efforts as the government is promoting local decision-making and women's rights.

[21]. Cultural and language diversity characterize both Indonesia and the Philippines with their myriad islands. Nonetheless women in this region are generally less oppressed that those in South Asia.

[22]. Edwards and Roces in their *Women in Asia* have framed the contest between women and modernization as one challenging conventional narratives, bringing to the discussion of women and power a distinct and intriguing perspective.

[23]. Based on personal interviews in Hanoi, September 1998.