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**The Challenges to Women in Political
Participation at the National Level from
the Two Latest Elections in
Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar**

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Acronyms

BPFA	Beijing Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs of Cambodia
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NLD	National League for Democracy
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
USDP	Union Solidarity Development Party

1. Introduction

The term “political equality’ implies that citizens have an equal voice in public decisions, and one way in which citizens are able to exert political authority and have their voices heard is through political participation.[1] Political participation is a vital component of democracy, and the nature and number of citizens involved in politics can significantly affect the quality of a country’s political life.[2] Consequently, the health of democracy can be measured by the extent to which citizens participate in the political process.[3] The strengthening of democracy through such participation requires the representation of all social groups. Therefore, women’s right to equal political participation deserves attention.[4] Women’s political participation cannot be understood in isolation from its context:[5] it not only reflects a country’s political maturity, but is also a significant element of national political democratization. Furthermore, by becoming involved in politics women are better able to pursue equality and seek better conditions for themselves in society.[6]

Despite the fact that women comprise around half of the global population, they continue to be underrepresented in political leadership positions around the world.[7] Southeast Asian nations have an impressive number of female national leaders. With 18.9 percent of MPs being women, the region stands slightly above the global average in the level of female representation in Parliaments at 18 percent. The 10 countries of ASEAN, along with Timor Leste, have shown progress in the inclusion of women in politics.[8]

In Cambodia, particular measures have been implemented, resulting in a positive increase in the proportion of female decision-makers at both national and sub-national levels.[9] Cambodian women represent 51 percent of the country’s population.[10] Although the Constitution guarantees them similar political rights to those of men, women, in practise, still struggle to fully participate in political affairs. In addition to economic restraints and further discrimination, based on their gender, a belief that women lack the capability to perform roles in political leadership remains throughout the nation, ranking Cambodia 91st out of 133 countries in a political empowerment assessment relating to female representation in the country’s politics.[11]

The government of Lao PDR is committed to promoting the advancement of women and equality between women and men.[12] And, in general, the government’s policies combined with rapid economic modernization have supported the steady advancement of the status of women in Lao PDR.[13] In 2016, the country held a national election, which was supported

by international communities and was a result of amendments to the Constitution. A total of 149 members were elected to the National Assembly, 41 of whom (27.52 percent) were female. This was an increase of 2.52 percent on the percentage who were elected in 2011.

The Constitution of Myanmar forbids discrimination against citizens based on race, birth, religion, official position, status, culture, sex, and wealth.[14] Furthermore, although the trend in women's political participation in Myanmar across the two most recent elections is positive, it nevertheless lags behind the figures reached in most countries in the region. With women accounting for 10.5 percent of MPs at the national level (including Military MPs), Myanmar is ranked ahead of Thailand (6 percent) and Malaysia (10.4 percent), but behind the Philippines (27.2 percent), Vietnam (25.3 percent), Singapore (23.9 percent), and Indonesia (17.1 percent).[15]

Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar have different political regimes, comprehensive electoral laws, and other vital instruments to empower women to participate in politics. In addition to such measures, impediments - cultural and traditional, socio-economic, and institutional,[16]. These are identified and discussed in this paper.

1.1. Objectives

- To compare the status of female Members of Parliament in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar and analyse relations between female Parliamentarians and political participation at the national level in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar;
- To compare impediments to women's political participation evident during the two most recent elections in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar; and
- To review existing legislation, policies, and strategies designed to overcome impediments to women's political participation at the national level in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar.

1.2. Research Questions

- What is the current situation relating to women's representation in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, and how do they connect to, or involve political participation at the national level?
- What are the different and similar challenges faced by women in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar in respect of political participation evident from the two most recent elections?

- What existing legislation, policies, and strategies have been implemented to overcome such challenges and to empower women’s political participation at the national level in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar?

1.3. Research Methodology

This paper examines secondary data collected from relevant theses, reports, research papers, articles, briefing notes, printed and electronic materials, online sources, government information, and so on.

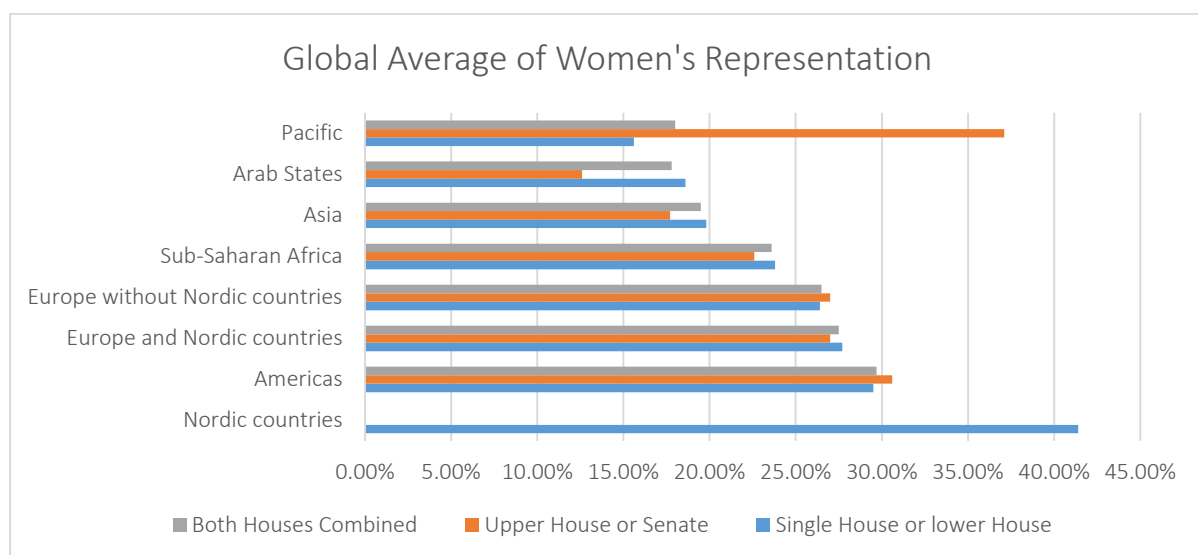
2. A Brief Overview of Women and Their Representation in the Parliaments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar

2.1. A Broad Picture of Women in Parliaments

For the last few years, women’s political participation has been a key topic for both international organizations and national governments, including civil society.[17] In reality, female representation in Parliaments remains low in numerous countries; therefore, gender equality and women’s empowerment remain critical goals on the post-2015 development agenda and are the stated objective of sustainable development goal 5.[18]

The underrepresentation of women in elected office is an immense challenge for democratization around the globe.[19] In 2016, women accounted for only 23 percent of MPs in national parliaments globally.[20] However, in 2017, they became slightly more conspicuous in parliaments as they took 27.1 percent of all seats that were up for re-election that year.[21]

Figure 1: Regional Average of Women’s Representation



Source: (2018) *Women in National Parliaments*. Available at: <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> [Accessed 12 November 2018]

2.2. Cambodia

2.2.1. Background about Cambodian Women

Women throughout Cambodian history have played a significant role in the political sphere as, “lance-carrying warriors and defenders of the Angkorean kingdom, influential consorts of kings, deviant divas, revolutionary heroines, spiritual protectors of Buddhist temples, and agents of peace.”[22] To be more precise, the image of women has always been compared to the celestial goddesses on the walls of Angkor Wat. With their “exquisite beam and distant gaze” they have served as a paragon for Cambodian women, [23] who, in turn, have been described as passive, patient, resourceful, and superstitious. For example, they live, eat, and dress in a simple manner, and this paper might confabulate that they are swayed easily by rumours and hearsay. [24]

Since 1913, Cambodia has confronted serious challenges, specifically in the political arena. From the perspective of women, the Constitution of 1993 was significant, which, among other documents, secured their right to vote. Table 1 below shows the proportion of female representatives in the National Assembly from the first to the sixth legislatures:[25]

Table 1: A comparison between a total number of all representatives and female representatives from the 1st legislature to the 6th legislature

Legislature	All Representatives	Female Representatives	Percentage
1 st from 1993-1998	120	7	5.83%
2 nd from 1998-2003	120	15	12.50%
3 rd from 2003-2008	123	24	19.51%
4 th from 2008-2013	123	26	21.13%
5 th from 2013-2018	123	25	20.32%
6 th from 2018-2023	125	25	20.00%

Source: Rathana, P., Keothyda, K., Bundeth, R., and Lyna k. (2018) *Women Member of Parliaments (MPs) of the World Conference*

2.2.2. Current Situation of Women in the National Assembly

The members of the National Assembly are the representatives of the whole Khmer nation and not only of the citizens from their own constituencies.[26] There are 125 MPs in the present legislature, and 25 seats have been taken by female Parliamentarians.[27]

One of the National Assembly's Commissions has a specific emphasis on supporting and promoting women, namely the Commission on Health, Social Affairs and Veterans, Youth Rehabilitation, Labour, Vocational Training, and Women's Affairs.

2.3. Lao PDR

2.3.1. Women before 2 December 1975

Women from Lao PDR are recognized as being gentle, conservative, and patient, and also modest in their appearance and in the way they express themselves in public.[28] To affirm their rights to gender equality, supported by political will and efficient implementation mechanisms, Lao women have achieved significant progress, and have become a significant force contributing to socio-economic development.[29] In 1930, at the start of the revolutionary movement, specifically in Indochinese States, a women's movement had been flourishing. And the Lao women's movement had evolved to be more active, fighting directly to oppose the imposition of heavy taxes, protesting against the enrolment of their men as coolies without any compensation, and against their maltreatment and humiliation.[30]

The Lao women's cause was officially addressed by a national government in 1975, with the ascendancy to power of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). The new people's democratic regime acknowledged equality between women and men in all aspects, for instance, political, economic, cultural, and social.[31] This also included the elimination of the subjugation of women, or contemptuous treatment or behaviour shown towards them.[32]

2.3.2. Current Women's Representation in the National Assembly

The National Assembly is the unicameral Parliament of Lao PDR.[33] It is the representative organization of the rights and interests of the Lao multi-ethnic people, the supreme organ of State power, and the legislative branch of government. It is responsible for the adoption of the Constitution and laws, it makes decisions about significant and fundamental issues in the country, and oversees and monitors the respect shown to, and implementation of the Constitution and laws by organs of the State.[34]

The Members of the National Assembly are elected by the Lao citizens and have a term of office of 5 years. Currently, there are 149 members, of whom 41 are female, representing 18 constituencies and various Lao multi-ethnic groups.[35]

As well as its members, the National Assembly has a component named the "Women's Parliamentarian Caucus", established by the National Assembly Standing Committee. The

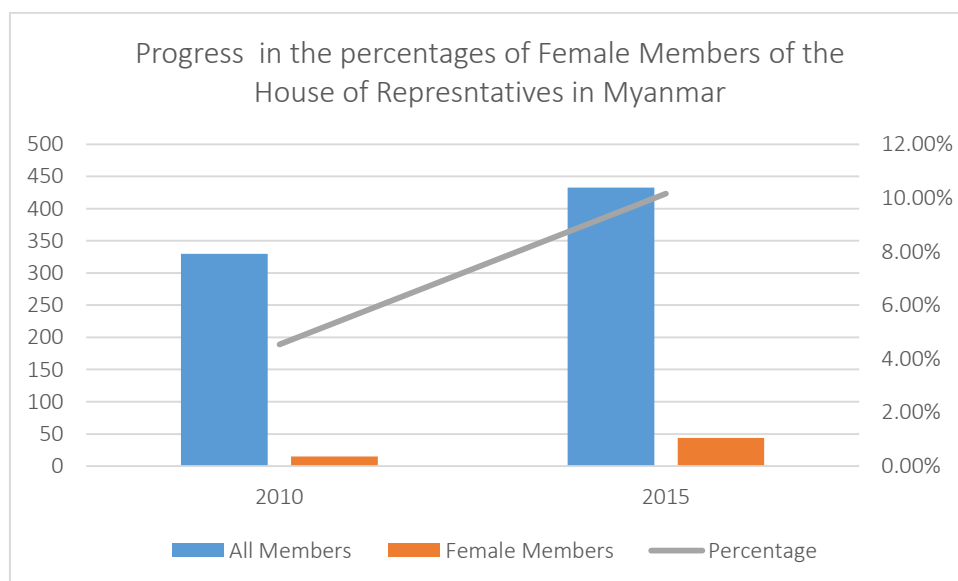
Women’s Parliamentarian Caucus, as a secretariat office of the National Assembly Standing Committee, plays a role in implementing three roles of the National Assembly; it liaises and cooperates with the Lao Women’s Union and relevant organisations to strengthen female representation in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies; it oversees and enhances the implementation of policies and strategic plans relating to gender equality, the advancement of women, and the protection of the legitimate rights and interests of women and children; it opposes all forms of discrimination and violence against women and children; and it implements all treaties and conventions relating to women and children.[36]

2.4. Myanmar

2.4.1. Historical Background about Women in Burmese Politics

Historically, Myanmar women have had a unique social status in society.[37] In terms of politics, women in Myanmar, as in numerous countries, participate in the political process as voters, candidates for elections, elected officials, holders of public office (elected or appointed), and as active citizens.[38] Although there is trend indicating that the proportion of female representatives seems to have increased, the statistical representation reveals a very high level of inequality.[39] Figure 2 below shows progress made in the number of female members of the House of Representatives from the 2010 and the 2015 elections.

Figure 2: Progress in the Percentages of female members of the House of Representatives in Myanmar



Source: (2018) *Women in National Parliaments: World Classification*. Available at: <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> [Accessed 3 October 2018]

2.4.2. Current Situation of Women in Parliament

The Myanmar Parliament is composed of 440 seats in the lower chamber or the House of Representatives - *Pyithu Hluttaw* - and of 224 seats in the upper chamber or the House of Nationalities—*Amyotha Hluttaw*.^[40] However, in the House of Representatives, members are elected only to 330 seats, while 110 representatives are chosen by the Commander-in-Chief, and are nominated from the Defence Services; similarly, members of the House of Nationalities are elected to not more than 168 seats, while the Commander-in-Chief appoints 56 personnel from the Defence Services.^[41]

Female Parliamentarians are represented, holding 44 of the 433 seats, calculated at 10.2 percent in the Lower House and 23 of the 221 seats, estimated at 10.4 percent in the Senate.^[42] That said, this paper will focus only on female members of the House of Representatives.

2.5. A Comparison of Women’s Representation Between Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar

As discussed above, this paper aims to compare the current percentages of female MPs in the National Assembly of Cambodia, the National Assembly of Lao PDR, and the House of Representatives of Myanmar. This is illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: A comparison of proportions of female members of Parliaments

Country	Elections	All Members	Female Members	Percentage
Cambodia	2018	125	25	20.00%
Lao PDR	2016	149	41	27.51%
Myanmar	2015	433	44	10.16%

The Table above demonstrates that Lao PDR is ranked in first place on account of its impressive percentage of female Parliamentarians, followed by Cambodia, and then Myanmar.

Both Cambodia and Lao PDR have similar institutional apparatuses, which support and promote the progress and advancement of women in their Parliaments. The National Assembly of Cambodia has the Commission on Health, Social Affairs and Veterans, Youth Rehabilitation, Labour, Vocational Training, and Women’s Affairs, which is part of the Permanent Committee. The National Assembly of Lao PDR has a Women’s Parliamentarian Caucus, which is not part of the Standing Committee, but which is an apparatus established by the Standing Committee.

3. Challenges to Women’s Political Participation from the Two Most Recent National Elections

3.1. Cambodia

3.1.1. A Basic Understanding of the Elections in 2013 and 2018

Cambodia is a multiparty constitutional monarchy with two legislative chambers—the National Assembly and the Senate.[43] The 2013 national elections were actually the fifth legislature of Members of the National Assembly to be held in Cambodia since the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1991.[44] The 2013 elections, moreover, were recognised as the most exciting for 15 years,[45] but were held in a generally smooth and peaceful manner. The elections also reflected the advancement of the implementation of democracy in Cambodia.[46] The ruling CPP won 68 seats, while the oppositional CNRP obtained 55 out of a total of 123 seats in the National Assembly.[47] The Table 3 below gives a summary of the 2013 election results. [48]

In contrast, there was a substantial difference in the sixth elections, held on 29 July 2018. Among 20 parties,[49] the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP) won all 125 seats in the National Assembly.[50] The voter turnout was 83.02 percent and there were 6,956,900 valid votes, with the CPP garnering 4,889,113.[51] Table 3 below demonstrates this CPP landslide victory. [52]

Table 3: Comparative results of the 2013 and 2018 elections of the National Assembly

Party	2013		2018	
	Percentage	Seats	Percentage	Seats
Cambodian People’s Party (CPP)	48.83%	68	76.85%	125
Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)	44.46%	55	—	—
FUNCINPEC	3.66%	—	5.89%	—
League for Democracy Party	1.03%	—	4.86%	—
Khmer Will party	—	—	3.35%	—
Khmer National United Party	—	—	1.56%	—
Grassroots Democratic Party	—	—	1.11%	—
Khmer Anti-Poverty Party	0.65%	—	0.87%	—
Khmer United Party	—	—	0.77%	—
Cambodian Nationality Party	0.58%	—	0.71%	—

Khmer Republican Party	—	—	0.65%	—
Cambodian Youth Party	—	—	0.62%	—
Khmer Economic Development Party	0.51%	—	—	—
Democratic Republican Party	0.29%	—	—	—
Others	—	—	1.90%	—
Total		123		125

Source: National Election Committee

3.1.2. Cultural Perspectives and Beliefs

In present-day Cambodia, women are responsible for housekeeping and taking care of their families.[53] Young girls prepare to be a good wives and, of course, good mothers, at an early age. These young girls are trained to respect and obey their parents, and they are expected to assist in taking care of younger siblings and the home.[22] Due to a patronage system that is male-dominated, women are still a minority at all levels of political participation, and this notion is grounded within a traditional society perpetuating beliefs about the roles and place that are suitable for women.[54] The impact of traditional and cultural beliefs, therefore, has had a far-reaching impact on how female Parliamentarians are viewed.[55] Thus, traditional beliefs about the capabilities of women lead to the notion that they are good inasmuch as they are more patient than men and are focused on childcare, social, and household activities.[56]

3.1.3. Socio-Economic Factors

The Cambodian economy has experienced rapid growth, achieving 6.9 percent increase in Gross Domestic Product in 2016.[57] Even though the country has been accomplishing such a high rate of economic development, women have achieved less in terms of their equal and fair economic independence.[58] In addition to economic issues, low levels of literacy have been an enormous impediment to women’s involvement in the country’s development and have deterred women from expressing views from their own perspectives.[59] Even so, social and economic situations have had an impact on women.

3.1.4. Institutional Issues

Institutional frameworks do not provide sufficient benefits and assistance for female candidates. The lack of social assistance available for women further creates impediments to women who wish to participate in politics. Lack of adequate and affordable childcare services

prohibits women from performing additional activities outside of their primary income-earning occupations.[55]

3.1.5. Political Obstacles

The political culture of Cambodia strongly affects women in terms of taking part in political representation. [55] A candidate needs internal support systems - contacts, financial resources and knowledge of political dynamics - in order to be elected, engaged in politics, and promoted. Therefore, financial support from institutions are vital for women in running for office.[60] Moreover, political campaigns often revolve around personalities, with political parties being little more than projections of party leaders. Consequently, during such campaigns, voters are encouraged to vote for individual personalities rather than for substantive policy issues and party platforms. These factors act as impediments to women in politics. [55]

3.2. Lao PDR

3.2.1. A Concise Background of National Elections in Lao PDR in 2011 and 2016

The seventh legislative elections of 2011 were held in a spirit that underlined the accomplishment of elections, a joyful atmosphere, the proclamation of the democratic rights of the Lao multi-ethnic people, and the exercise of political rights.[61] The LPRP won 128 seats, while four went to independent representatives.[62]

In 2016, Lao PDR held national elections to welcome a cohort of new and experienced representatives from various ethnicities. Some 3.66 million votes were reported to have been cast from the 3.73 million eligible voters for the National Assembly's eighth legislature, representing a turnout of 97.9 percent.[63] There are a total 149 seats in the National Assembly's eighth legislature, an increase from the seventh mandate of 17 seats as a result of population growth. The LPRP took 144, while five seats were taken by independent representatives.[64]

Table 4: A comparison of seats between the 2011 and the 2016 elections

Party	2011 Elections	2016 Elections
LPRP	128	144
Independent candidates	4	5
Total	<u>132</u>	<u>149</u>

Source: (2016) Lao People's Democratic Republic: Election for Sapha Heng Xat (Laotian National Assembly) [Online]. ElectionGuide. Available at: <http://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/2963/> [Accessed 3 October 2018].

3.2.2. *Traditional Impacts*

Traditionally, Lao society has been patriarchal in structure.[65] This has led to belief that a wife needs to respect and obey her husband.[66] Lao tradition recognizes the division of labor between women and men—seeing women in a role as carer. A daughter, for example, takes care of her aging parents, and a mother not only looks after her children, but also provides care when her daughter is in the process of giving birth.[67] As a result, men are predominant, particularly in decision-making roles.

3.2.3. *Socio-Economic Participation*

There are two major socio-economic factors affecting Lao women in politics—economic access and educational situation. First, the transformation from a central-planning to a market-oriented economy was launched in 1986, aiming to promote economic activities.[68] As the national economy progresses, Lao women have been seeking not only improvements in their welfare, but also the guarantee of equal opportunities to access economic opportunities.[69] Second, the literacy rate has become satisfactory. Even though education is undergoing a process of decentralization,[70] the number of people undergoing higher education remains low[71] because only five public universities exist in the country.[72] In conclusion, this paper maintains that there are two major factors - the economy and education – that impede the involvement of Lao women in politics.

3.2.4. *Political Regime*

The Lao political system hampers the involvement of women for two main reasons- the monopoly of the ruling party and public awareness. First and foremost, the LPRP came to power in 1975[73] and has the monopoly in respect of political power.[74] Also, having a position in the National Assembly does not automatically mean that Lao women have influence in decision-making.[75] To understand this issue, we need to look beyond the Lao political structure, which is composed of two major elements – the LPRP and the government. The LPRP and the Government are interlinked, but the actual decision-making power is vested in the LPRP.[76] Consequently, the National Assembly is fundamentally ruled by the LPRP. Subsequently, female parliamentarians need more understanding on their political functions. While the National Assembly has a crucial role in overseeing government

activity and in representing constituencies, public awareness of its roles and functions remains low.[77] This not only means that citizens, but also Parliamentarians themselves might not have a thorough knowledge of the rights and duties of the National Assembly.

3.3. Myanmar

3.3.1. The General Elections of 2010 and 2015

On 7 November 2010, the citizens of Myanmar had the opportunity to vote in the first elections for 20 years.[78] The result was announced in the State media, and the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) won a landslide majority with 76.8 percent of seats in the Upper House, 79.4 percent of seats in the Lower House, and a total 78.5 percent of seats across both Houses.[79]

However, in November 2015, Myanmar held nationwide elections that were recognized as a sweeping victory, [80] and an enormous success for the National League for Democracy (NLD), [39] with the party winning 79.4 percent of seats and 59.4 percent of the total number of seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (the Union Assembly).[81] Indeed, the NLD won 135 seats, and USDP gained only 12 from the entire 168 seats available in the House of Nationalities,[82] and also 255 from the entire 323 seats available in the House of Representatives.[83]

Table 5: Results of the 2015 National Legislature Elections[84]

Party	Lower Chamber (House of Representatives)	Upper Chamber (House of Nationalities)	Total	Elected (Percentage)	Including Military (Percentage)
NLD	255	135	390	79.4%	59.4%
USDP	30	11	41	8.4%	6.2%
ANP	12	10	22	4.5%	3.3%
SNLD	12	3	15	3.1%	2.3%
Ta' Ang	3	2	5	1.0%	0.8%
PNO	3	1	4	0.8%	0.6%
ZCDP	2	2	4	0.8%	0.6%
Independent Candidates	1	2	3	0.6%	0.5%
Lisu NDP	2	0	2	0.4%	0.3%

KSPD	1	0	1	0.2%	0.2%
Mon NP	0	1	1	0.2%	0.2%
Wa-DP	1	0	1	0.2%	0.2%
NUP	0	1	1	0.2%	0.2%
Total	323	168	491	100%	74.73%
Military					25.27%

Source: Bunte, M. (2016). *The End of Military-Guided Electoral Authoritarianism: The 2015 Elections in Myanmar*. Monash University Malaysia, Available at: http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc/Resources/Paper/16051910_176%20-%20WP%20-%20Dr%20Bunte.pdf.

3.3.2. Instrumental Issues

Traditionally, Myanmar women have limited knowledge about their rights or about the laws that protect them from abuse.[85] Women’s rights have been limited by some Acts, laws, and religious laws.[86] In 2014, the Myanmar Parliament adopted four laws known collectively as “Laws on the Protection of Race and Religion”[87] which further entrench gender-based discrimination against women.[88] These four laws are composed of (1) “Religious Conversion Law” which requires that any individual who wants to convert to another religion needs to obtain permission[89]; (2) “Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law” which has been criticized by international organizations as a violation against internationally protected rights to privacy, religious belief, and equal protection of the law[90]; (3) “Population Control Healthcare Law” which directs authorities to impose restrictions on “birth spacing” and which violates the right to privacy and a women’s right to choose when to have children[91]; and (4) Monogamy Law[92]. These laws are examples of regulatory issues that are recognized as impediments to women.

3.3.3. Cultural and Traditional Factors

In Myanmar, as in numerous other societies, traditional and cultural beliefs present impediments to the political participation of women.[93] First and foremost, the notion of leadership begins in the home where men are recognized as the household head; this notion is then reinforced in public and religious life where men dominate positions of power.[94] Additionally, the religion of Theravada Buddhism dominates in Myanmar, and might serve to explain why women are considered to be subordinate to men.[95] Both of these perspectives lead to cultural norms and values that are patriarchal. For instance, men are considered to have responsibilities for decision-making and household income generation as masters of the

household, but women have obligations in respect of housework and childcare.[86] This paper, in summary, understands that women are seen primarily as home-makers, while men are decision-makers.[96]

3.3.4. Socio-Economic Factors

There are two main issues that have an impact on women in terms of social and economic access. This paper aims to highlight economic and educational impediments. Initially, since opening up in 2012, Myanmar has become one of the most rapidly growing economies in ASEAN, with an average annual economic growth of 7.5 percent from 2012 to 2016.[97] Despite this rapid economic development, the women of Myanmar, particularly those residing in rural areas, struggle to achieve favorable living conditions.[98] And they recognize that cultural stereotypes undermine them in respect of economic advancement.[99] Therefore, women risk losing out on economic progress inasmuch as they traditionally have scant access to resources, to financial services, or to the development of necessary skills.[100] Indeed, Myanmar as a whole lags behind the developed world in terms of educational standards.[101] In the year 2013-2014, only 8,597,384 students attended primary, middle, and high schools which is recognized as a poor rate, based on the entire population.[102] Traditionally, the class monitor or a team leader at a primary or even secondary school has been assumed to be a boy, reinforcing the notion that it is natural for boys to be leaders.[103] In summary, this paper argues that socio-economic factors often indirectly serve to keep Myanmar women out of the political arena.[104]

3.3.5. Political and Military System

From 1962-1974 there was direct military governance by the Revolutionary Council in Myanmar.[105] Between the military coup in 1962 that seized power by dissolving Parliament and the new parliamentary rule that came into force in 2011, a period of nearly half of a century had elapsed.[106] This paper aims to highlight two political impediments to women's participation in politics as representatives - a candidate selection process and an electoral procedure. First, one of elements that works against women in elections is the way in which candidates are selected. Female candidates are assigned to constituencies which their party has no, or little, chance to win, and any individual who wishes to be a candidate, needs to pay a fee to a party.[80] Nonetheless, there is no strong and sufficient evidence supporting that behaviour.[39] Second, an electoral design can influence both women and men in terms of becoming Members of Parliament.[80] In all chambers, voters, in accordance

with the Constitution and electoral law, elect 75 percent of the Members of Parliament,[107] while the rest (25 percent of seats) are reserved for military personnel appointed by the commander-in-chief. These seats are consequently not contested in elections.[108] The reservation of seats for such (all-male) military appointments could be said to reduce gender equality in terms of its statistical representation in Parliament.[80]

4. A Comparative Analysis of Challenges to Women’s Political Participation

After discussing the impediments to the political participation of women in each relevant country, this paper will compare them in accordance with Table 6 below:

Table 6: A comparison of similarities and differences in the challenges to women’s political participation

Similarity	Difference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and traditional issues • Socio-economic factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political contexts • Legal frameworks

4.1. Similarities

4.1.1. Cultural and Traditional Issues

Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are patriarchal societies. This is a consequence of Buddhist religious beliefs mingled with traditional customs.

Initially, religion, which has been assimilated within society from the foundation of the country, has become the motto of the Kingdom of Cambodia—Nation, Religion, King.[26] In Lao PDR, even though the Constitution does not define Buddhism as the national religion, Lao citizens have been accustomed to the teachings of Buddhism for a long time, and it has has a strong influence on the everyday life of the people.[109] Approximately 90 percent of the people of Myanmar practise Theravada Buddhism.[110] However, Buddhism does not restrict either educational opportunities or religious freedom, and women are capable of realising enlightenment, just as men are.[111] Nonetheless, women in those three countries have, for centuries, been confronting harsh forms of discrimination,[112] not least because the status of women has depended on an interpretation of religious texts.[113] Therefore, women have not been fully able to participate in religious activities, leading them to be ambivalent, and restricting them from taking decision-making roles.

Another similarity among the countries is tradition. This paper has identified the communities in those three countries as patriarchal, in which men have all or almost all of the power.[114]

Men function as the head of household, which gives them the authority to oppress women through social, political, and economic institutions.[115] This notion brings about a classification of wives and husbands in which wives are the “producing class”, while men are the “expropriating class”. Therefore, women in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar tend to focus on taking care of their families rather than on assuming public roles.

Thus, this paper illustrates similar impediments - cultural and traditional – that affect women’s ability to participate in politics in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar.

4.1.2. Socio-Economic Factors

In terms of socio-economic factors, two can be highlighted as similarities in the three countries, that act as hindrances to women in politics—rapid economic growth and rates of educational achievement.

First and foremost, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are all enjoying rapid economic growth. To be more precise, in 2016, the average annual economic growth rate was 6.9 percent for both Cambodia[57] and Lao PDR. [116] Myanmar achieved an annual growth rate of 7.5 percent from 2012 to 2016.[97] However, even though the three nations have been achieving economic development, people seem not to be gaining wealth from economic participation. For instance, Cambodian women have no equal treatment and opportunities,[58] Lao women are still seeking fair and full access to the economy,[69] and Myanmar women, in striving to achieve economic advancement, have been prohibited by stereotypes.[117] In conclusion, having no full equal access to economic development is detrimental to female progression.

Education plays a vital role in politics. Female students in Cambodia had a low literacy rate, with an average of 67.2 percent in 2013.[118] In Lao PDR, only 77,284 students were attending universities in 2014.[119] In Myanmar, during 2013-2014, there were only 8,597,384 students attending primary, middle, and high schools.[102] These three countries have a poor rate in terms of education based on a percentage of their whole population. Those numbers do little to support an understanding of political participation and involvement, and women are particularly affected.

4.2. Differences

4.2.1. Political Contexts

The perfect political system does not exist.[120] Consequently, there is a dissimilarity between the political systems of Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar. The Kingdom of

Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy in which the King functions as determined by the Constitution and the principles of liberal multi-party democracy.[26] According to the Constitution, Lao PDR is a people’s democratic state. All powers belong to the people and are exercised by the people and for the interests of the multi-ethnic people of all social strata with the workers, farmers, and the intelligentsia as key components. In addition, the rights of the Lao multi-ethnic people to be the masters of the country are exercised and ensured through the functioning of the political system with the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party as its leading body.[31] The power of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar is outlined in the Constitution, derived from the citizens and is in force in the entire country, and the Union has a genuine and disciplined multi-party democratic system.[14] It is found that the three countries have apparently dissimilar systems, and they have their own identities. This paper identifies these in accordance with Table 7 below.

Table 7: A comparison of political regimes between Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar

Country	State Form	Government Form	Party System	Ruling Party
Cambodia	Unitary-Kingdom	Parliamentary-Bicameral	Multi	CPP
Lao PDR	Unitary-Republic	Parliamentary-Unicameral	Single	LPRP
Myanmar	Federal-Republic	Parliamentary-Bicameral	Multi	NLD

4.2.2. Legal Frameworks

A legal framework is essential for the effective administration of democratic elections which adhere to both national laws and international obligations.[122] Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are State parties to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), but there are some issues that need, in practise, to be addressed through legislative frameworks. This paper aims to compare laws in terms of the way they impede women of the three countries covered in this paper. In Cambodia, although the Constitution confirms the equality of women and men in all fields, the implementation of this in the laws directly supporting and promoting women in political participation is nebulous. Lao PDR has several laws that unambiguously promote women’s participation in public life. For example, the Law on the Anti and Opposition of Violence against Women and Children, the Law on Lao Women’s Union, the Law on the Development and Protection of Women, and so on. The Constitution guarantees the equal rights and obligations of women and men in Myanmar, but a few laws could prohibit female expression,

particularly the four collective laws comprising the Religious Conversion Law, the Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage Law, the Population Control Healthcare Law, and the Monogamy Law.

5. A Short Review of Existing Legislation, Policies, and Strategies to Promote Women’s Representation in Parliaments

5.1. Laws as Primary Legislation

CEDAW was ratified by Cambodia in 1992, with no reservations.[123] Article 35 of the Constitution provides that Khmer citizens of both sexes have the right to participate actively in the political, social, and cultural life of the nation.[26] Cambodia protects the equal rights of women and men in all fields, particularly in the political arena.[124] And the Government has issued laws to implement CEDAW. This paper gives examples of three internal laws supporting women’s representation. First, the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims aims to provide a legal mechanism to prevent domestic violence, to protect victims, and to preserve harmony within households.[125] Second, the Law on Elections of Members of the National Assembly states that any Cambodian citizen can stand as a candidate.[126] Finally, the Law on Political Parties allows any individual, who is at least 18 years old and who has the civil right, may be a member of a political party, and a member of a political party has same rights and obligations as provided by a statute of such a political party.[127]

Lao PDR ratified CEDAW in 1981.[128] Therefore, it has been promulgating several laws to fulfil its associated commitments and obligations. Table 4 lists the laws that have already been promulgated.[129]

Table 8: Lists of Lao laws promoting women in politics

No.	Name	Promulgated Date	Objective
1.	Law on the Anti and Opposition of Violence against Women and Children	30 January 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •To protect, preserve, and assist victims; •To protect legitimate rights and interests of women and children; •To eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and children;

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To raise roles and dignity of women and children and achieve equality between women and men.
2.	Law on Lao Women's Union	20 August 2013	To develop and protect legitimate rights and interests of Lao multi-ethnic women nationwide.
3.	Law on Development and Protection of Women	15 November 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure responsibilities of State, society, and family to women; • To enhance the knowledge and capability of women; • To oppose trafficking of, and internal violation against women; • To create favorable conditions for women in the protection and construction of the country.

Source: (2018) Legislations. Available at: <http://www.laogov.gov.la/legaldoc/pages/document.aspx?LoailD=2> [Accessed 2 October 2018].

In 1997, Myanmar ratified CEDAW and committed to BPFA.[130] The government has been working with its partners - both international and national - to implement the Convention. This paper focuses on existing legislation comprising the Penal Code and the draft Law on the Prevention and Protection of Violence against Women. First, the Penal Code of 1890 remains unrevised since the country gained independence from British colonial rule.[131] The Penal Code contains no specific law or provision to address domestic violence, but does include more general provisions against “committing bodily harm against another individual.”[132] For example, the Penal Code prohibits rape, but not marital rape (unless the victim is under the age of 14 years).[131] The following law is the draft Law on the Prevention and Protection of Violence against Women which is being revised by relevant sectors - both government and private, including NGOs.[133] The draft law defines the necessity to protect women from all forms of violence,[134] such as intimate partner violence, marital rape, sexual violence, harassment by stalking, harassment in the workplace and public places, and violence through traditional and customary practises.[135]

5.2. Government's Policies to Overcome Challenges to Women's Representation in Parliaments

Neary Rattanak IV, endorsed by the government, is a five-year strategic plan (2014-2018) for the gender equality and empowerment of women in Cambodia. The primary purposes are to [9]: (1) create favorable conditions to increase women's access to skills training, employment, productive resources, social protection, and to be able to express opinions, and take part in decision-making in the economic sector; (2) increase women's and girls' access to education and vocational training by expanding participation, awareness, and favorable conditions; (3) advance the provision of, and access to quality and affordable health services responding to women's specific health needs; (4) ensure the safety of women and girls in the family and society through awareness-raising and by implementing relevant action plans, laws, and regulations to prevent gender-based violence; (5) promote the participation of women in decision-making at all levels through increasing the number of female civil servants and elected leaders, as well as strengthening their capability and opportunities for promotion; and (6) improving the effectiveness of aid, and the sustainability of development, based on institutional capacity development, ownership, and partnership.

In 2016, the government of Lao PDR issued the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2016-2025) and the 3rd Five-Year National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2016-2020) in order to improve the advancement of women, gender equality, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Such documents reflect a long-term will and the determination of the State to implement CEDAW and BPFA, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[136] Furthermore, the government endorsed the National Action Plan for the Protection and the Elimination of Violence against Women and Children (2014-2020) and established national frameworks and mechanisms to support the rights and interests of women and children, and to protect them from, and eliminate all forms of physical, mental, and sexual discrimination.[137]

The National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013-2022) declares that all Myanmar women are empowered to, and capable of fully enjoying their rights with the support of the government.[138] Systems, structures, and practises have been created for the advancement of women, gender equality, and the realization of women's rights. One key priority area - women and decision-making - additionally rivets on three surveys. It, first and foremost, recognizes women's right to participate in decision-making in the government,

including in Parliaments, parliamentary committees, Ministries, departments, and political parties - at all levels. It also supports women's participation in senior, technical, and professional positions and in the decision-making processes of government departments and recognizes the challenges they confront. Finally, it recommends the visibility and frequency of reporting in media covering females in decision-making roles in both the government and private sectors.

5.3. Strategies in Achieving the Empowerment of Women in respect of Political Participation

To promote gender equality in decision-making at all levels and to mainstream gender in policies, plans, and sectoral programs, the Cambodian Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) has issued some strategies[9] by increasing the degree of women's participation in the civil service, strengthening the capacity and ability of female civil servants and women in decision-making to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, increasing the number of women in political positions, disseminating gender assessments and ensuring that national statistical systems are gender-responsive, and guaranteeing that policies, plans, programs, regulations, and processes are responsive to need.

Lao PDR has impressive legislation and governmental policies to achieve the advancement of women. Nonetheless, it needs more strategic implementation in all aspects. Specifically, the full use of national-level institutions, namely the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, the Women's Parliamentarian Caucus, and the Lao Women's Union, is necessary.[139] In accordance with the law, such institutions are required to establish women's working groups and action plans. It is essential not only to establish such elements, but also to address the facts that hinder women's participation in politics.

Myanmar is recognised as one of the first countries in Asia to grant women the right to vote.[140] To adhere to the policies in relation to women's representation in politics, the Myanmar National Committee for Women's Affairs endorsed three strategies.[138] Initially, awareness-raising was a fundamental strategy. Relevant sectors are required to implement apprehensible propagations through policies on women's representation and participation in decision-making and in national-level positions and to address traditional, customary regulations and discriminatory practices identified as a barrier to women's political participation. Second, practical initiatives concentrating on the dissemination of information for women about public affairs were considered essential. The implementation encompasses

the oversight of programs for female Parliamentarians to support their leadership and decision-making aspirations, as well as measures to increase the proportion of women engaged in electoral procedures. Finally, a substantial budget was allocated, as well as human and material resources, so that associated activities might be quickly facilitated by both the government and NGOs.

This paper focuses on SDG 5 as an appropriate strategy for all three countries. The SDG target 5.5 is to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life by defining two indicators: (1) the proportion of seats held by women in national Parliaments and local governments; and (2) the proportion of women in managerial positions.[141] After discussing specific strategies for each particular country to achieve SDG 5, this paper also focuses on an educational strategy—which those three countries might contextualize to their own circumstances. There are two main strands to this - strengthening teacher training and eliminating the gender bias in textbooks.

In the case of training, the governments of Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar should ensure that all teachers in schools undergo gender-sensitivity training, and teachers should be required not to classify students by gender when they are teaching. While criticizing students, teachers should not use terms that refer to gender, for instance, "boys should do A," and "girls should do B." When guiding students in selecting subjects, majors, or even careers, teachers need to focus on students' interests and talents instead of gender. Furthermore, teachers need to encourage students to concentrate on majors and professions that are regarded as the careers of the opposite gender. To be more precise, teachers can encourage girls to study engineering and maths, and inspire boys to study health care, nursery education, and so on.

The second strategy relates to the development of textbooks. First and foremost, more women figures and illustrations should be conspicuously acquainted, and the notion of gender equality should be assumed in textbooks. Even though most textbooks recognize cultural values, gender equality should also be emphasized. For example, there should be more texts and examples based on women's experiences and perspectives, and the work in textbooks needs to offer activities relevant to both genders. Also, examples of career women who have made great contributions through their work to the world, and of outstanding female politicians and leaders of the nations, should be featured in textbooks. This can

strengthen the confidence and sense of responsibility of female students. Also, such examples can help girls to develop a sense of innovation and assist them to develop a healthy personality. The examples should, in all respects, avoid stereotypes of women as being at the bottom of societal structures.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored a fundamental issue - women's political participation - which is a negative component of today's democracy. Politics encompasses all aspects of citizens' lives and requires all social groups to participate. And women have a substantial role to play by participating.

There are four fundamental reasons to study the challenges to women's political participation from the two most recent elections in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR. First, this paper has aimed to understand the current situations of women in Parliaments. Second, the representation women is also significant. Third, a comparative analysis between the three countries of similar and different impediments to women's representation has been conducted in this paper. Finally, this paper reviews existing legislation, policies, and strategies to overcome such impediments.

Women in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, due to their locations, experience similar situations in parliamentary representation. This paper recognises two similarities in the impediments they face in political participation at the national level—cultural-traditional issues and socio-economic factors. First and foremost, this paper identifies the fact that Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar are patriarchal societies because of the influence of the Buddhist religion, mingled with traditional customs. Socio-economic conditions also have an impact on women in their efforts to achieve representation roles in politics. The findings show that limited economic involvement and a poor rate of literacy, hamper women if they wish to seek political recognition.

This paper has also discovered that two different impediments make a distinction between women in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar. Initially, political systems divide those countries and give rise to different numbers of female Members of Parliament. Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy, has a bicameral parliamentary form of government, and recognizes the multi-liberal party system. Lao PDR is a unitary republic, has a unicameral parliamentary form of government, and a single party system. Myanmar is a federal republic, has a bicameral parliamentary form of government, and a multi-liberal party system. Second,

regulatory issues are also significant as a barrier to political participation. Cambodia has three fundamental laws supporting the advancement of women in politics, namely the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims, the Law on Elections of Members of the National Assembly, and the Law on Political Parties. Lao PDR has many laws enhancing women's political participation, but the three specific laws are the Law on the Anti and Opposition of Violence against Women and Children, the Law on Lao Women's Union, and the Law on the Development and Protection of Women. In Myanmar, the Penal Code is the first regulation protecting women from discrimination, and the Government is currently working on the draft Law on the Prevention and Protection of Violence against Women.

To achieve gender equality in politics, this paper underlines the importance of education. Of course, different countries have different strategies, but one strategy that Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar are able to share is a focus on education. This paper supports two approaches. First, equality could be improved through teacher training on gender equality to encourage teachers to implement notions of equality in their professional practice. Second, students could be inspired by the introduction of educational textbooks with more illustrations and examples of successful women or outstanding female leaders.

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