

**Panel Proposal for EUROSEAS 2019:  
Women and politics in Southeast Asia - navigating a man's world**

Convenor:	Theresa Devasahayam, PhD, Mahidol University
Moderator:	Prof. Dr. Claudia Derichs, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, <a href="mailto:claudia.derichs@hu-berlin.de">claudia.derichs@hu-berlin.de</a>
Presenters:	Theresa Devasahayam, PhD, Mahidol University (Thailand), Institute of Population and Social Research, <a href="mailto:twdevasahayam@yahoo.com.sg">twdevasahayam@yahoo.com.sg</a> Andrea Fleschenberg dos Ramos Pinéu, PhD, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, <a href="mailto:andrea.fleschenberg@hu-berlin.de">andrea.fleschenberg@hu-berlin.de</a> Lina Knorr, M.A., Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, <a href="mailto:lina.knorr@hu-berlin.de">lina.knorr@hu-berlin.de</a>

This panel intends to combine the book launch of the edited volume “Women and politics in Southeast Asia: navigating a man’s world“ (by Theresa W. Devasahayam, Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, Series: The Sussex Library of Asian and Asian American Studies, 2019) with a discussion on three distinct Southeast Asian case studies of androcentric politics, namely Burma/Myanmar, Singapore and Indonesia. It is well known that politics is a male-dominated realm constructed as a male preserve and that women are never “admitted as full and equal members of most polities”, particularly in the case of formal party politics (Fagan and Munk 1997, 103). The complex terrain of formal party politics and women’s experiences in this arena has led to a wave of studies offering a glimpse into the different facets of women’s engagement or, for that matter, disengagement in the political domain. The book to be launched as well as the conference panel presentations contribute to the discourse on women and politics in Southeast Asia by exploring how women navigate the power structures embedded in a male-dominated realm. As in much of the literature on the subject, politics encompasses processes, events, and activities pertaining to the governance of a country or area related to government, parliament, parties and generally the state that regulate public life. While the book acknowledges that there has been a growing literature on the role of women in politics in Southeast Asia, there is far less research which analyses in detail the asymmetrical power relationships between the sexes. This is a gap that deserves to be addressed. In keeping with this aim, we attempt to highlight the “contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics” (Waylen 1998, 1). In regards to gender relations, it must be recognized that Southeast Asia is unique in one respect – women in this region, relative to their sisters in other parts of Asia, enjoy considerable power and autonomy (Dube 1997; Raybeck 1980/1981, 1992; Stivens 1996; Stoler 1977; Strange 1981; Sullivan 1994; Wolf 1990, 1992; Wazir Jahan Karim 1992). But does this power and autonomy Southeast Asian women hold translate into greater engagement in politics for them? For this purpose, we present the three case studies, investigating the:

- opposition politician-turned-de facto head of government Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma/Myanmar in a context of androcentric transition politics at the backdrop of a long-ruling military regime;
- competing realities and gender roles negotiations of female candidates in Singapore, having to negotiate a “triple burden” when entering politics at the backdrop of a socio-political patriarchal reality, with blurred lines between public and private patriarchy and the challenges it generates;
- the gender-specific barriers that female members of a matriarchal community face in Indonesia when negotiating regional- and national-level androcentric politics and gender roles prescriptions; thus in an arena which exacerbates or inhibits by its setup and dynamics the transfer and employment of otherwise accumulated power and capital.

### ***Additional Information on Individual Panel Presentations***

In her presentation ***The Triple Burden” - Politics and the Competing Realities of Singaporean Women***, Theresa Devasahayam argues that although the door leading to the world of politics may not be closed to women, nevertheless they struggle with deciding whether or not to enter the domain, not because of their lack of capacity or viewing this domain as an arena belonging only to men, but because of competing demands placed on them by dominant gender norms positing their primary role as caregiver. The paper speaks to this very issue faced by women political candidates in Singapore. In spite of the efforts of the dominant party as well as opposition parties to recruit women political party candidates, narratives reveal that women have not had significant success in this regard over the years. In the author’s interviews with women political leaders and potential candidates, a critical obstacle found that women faced in whether or not to run for politics is their responsibility to fulfil their familial demands. Should a woman consider joining politics, she does not only face a ‘double burden’, highlighting women’s coping strategies as mothers and workers with power differentials in the family in favour of men, but a ‘triple burden’, since in Singapore, becoming a politician is not a full-time career - politicians continue to hold down their full-time jobs in addition to taking on political duties. Having to struggle with balancing the three spheres of family, work, and politics—clearly a woman’s “struggle” and not a man’s since he does not have to contend with these multiple roles—the author argues that the likelihood of neglecting family or career is great because of the demands of a political life and unless and until Singaporean women have found ways of balancing the demands of these three spheres, which often comes at a cost, they are more likely to make the decision of not pursuing a political career. But what kind of choices are women left with? Can they operate within a different value system rather than one that is carved out by men? The possibilities, she suggests, are limited, dependent on whether husbands are willing to ‘mind the children’ and play a larger role of manager in the household, and by extension countering the gender stereotypes embedded in the male breadwinner/female caregiver model.

*Author information: Theresa W. Devasahayam is Foreign Expert in the Institute of Population and Social Research (IPSR) at Mahidol University, Thailand, where works on population ageing. She is also Associate Faculty at Singapore University of Social Sciences where she teaches courses on gender, health sociology, diversity, and Southeast Asian Studies. Publications of significance include Ensuring a Square Meal: Women and Food Security in Southeast Asia. Singapore: World Scientific (2018); Gender and Ageing: Southeast Asian Perspectives. Singapore: ISEAS (2014); Gender, Emotions and Labour Markets: Asian and Western Perspectives. London: Routledge, (2011) (co-authored with Ann Brooks); and Working and Mothering in Asia: Images, Ideologies and Identities. Singapore and Copenhagen: NUS Press and NIAS Press (co-edited with Brenda S.A. Yeoh) (2007). She has also been cited by CNN, Bloomberg, Channel NewsAsia, and The Straits Times on her views on women, family, and ageing issues. Theresa holds a PhD in anthropology from Syracuse University, New York, U.S.A.*

In the case study ***A matrilineal society’s influence on the accessibility of women in politics - Minangkabau women missing in Indonesian politics***, Lina Knorr investigates the nexus between a matrilineal system and gendered notion of political representation in Indonesia. The Minangkabau, an ethnic minority in Indonesia, are famous for their matrilineal – by some even described as matriarchal – system. Despite the conflicting aspects that outsiders detest to their social system, often hereby referring to the complicated relationship between the matrilineal customary law (*adat*) and Islam, the Minangkabau have found ways to peacefully assemble *adat*, Islam and the Indonesian political order. Minangkabau women are known for the powerful status in Indonesia and beyond, mainly due to the matrilineal inheritance system at play, which increases the financial independence of women in the area. This power, however, does not seem to transfer into an extensive representation of women in the political

arena. This has raised questions in the past as Minangkabau women have been highly represented in other male-dominated spheres, such as academia. Why are women, in a female-centered society, largely absent from the political arena? Does this transfer to a lack of female representation from decision-making in general? Or is the power of Minangkabau women restricted to the private sphere?

*Author information: Lina Knorr is a Research Associate and Lecturer at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She obtained her Master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Augsburg. Her research interests centre around feminism, post-colonialism, decoloniality and kinship structures. In her current doctoral research, she focuses on matrilineal societies in Asia and their interaction with national politics.*

**In *Winds of Change for Women Politicians in Myanmar? A Case Study of Aung San Suu Kyi***, Andrea Fleschenberg investigates the most recent political career of the country's most influential female politician, Aung San Suu Kyi, since her release from house arrest in late 2010 until the event of the 2015 elections to assess the potential 'winds of change' to strengthen, broaden, and mainstream women's political representation and participation. One key concern is, taking cue from bell hook's concerns of a need to re-conceptualize how we perceive 'power' and, as a consequence, what leadership studies of women politicians such as Aung San Suu Kyi entail in terms of narrative and framework, in particular given the intricate 'messiness' and volatility of transition politics alongside perpetuated, gender-specific power asymmetries and ideological underpinnings which have neither been systematically debated, problematized or challenged by a critical mass of political stakeholders, men and women alike, in Myanmar. As I have argued elsewhere (Fleschenberg 2008, 2013), a number of Asia's leading women politicians - with Aung San Suu Kyi being a case in point - managed to enter and maneuver relatively successfully in the sphere of public politics, be it as head of state / government / parliamentary opposition or as head of a reform movement/political party and so forth because of their socioeconomic status and belonging to a political family. None of these women entered the political arena on a feminist agenda, based or considered their political agenda on an implicit mainstreaming policy for women, but predominantly focused on a democratization of the polity and society—some with a gender-specific notion, but not a prioritized one, if at all. Aung San Suu Kyi's success story was to a significant degree based on her challenge to the military's hegemonic definition and claim of power. Already in the period of 2010-2015 and long before the current controversy around her moral silence and stance on the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi's political agency and trajectory encountered itself at a difficult, complex crossroad, a type of political dilemma situation for the country's foremost woman politician. Her use of moral capital pre-2011 can be understood as a creative way to conceptualize and exercise the power to resist militarized-cum-masculinized hegemonic conceptions, claims, and practices of repressive power through boycotting public discourses, practices, circumscriptions of voice and agency as well as refusing to subscribe to roles or identity prescriptions by the ruling male groups—be they military or religious. However, Aung San Suu Kyi's change in political status and her incorporation into the formalized structure of transition (power) politics and "bread and butter issues" opened the window to potential disruption and corruption of her political agency and agenda at the backdrop of a tricky and murky puzzle of transformatory change, if it actually is one, and it's potential for diffusion to politically active women across the country.

*Author information: Andrea Fleschenberg, PhD, is assistant professor at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. From 2011-2017 she worked at DAAD Long Term Guest Professor at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan, while holding visiting lectureships at the University of Peshawar and the National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. Her research areas are comparative politics, democratization and peace and conflict studies with a particular focus on South and*

*Southeast Asia, gender and politics, state and institution-building, transitional justice issues. Selected publications: 'Afghanistan: Uphill Challenges for Women's Political Rights', in: Franceschet et al. (eds.), The Palgrave Handbook on Women's Political Rights, London et al.: Palgrave 2018, pp. 185-199; Unmaking Political Patriarchy through Gender Quotas? (co-authored with F. Bari), Islamabad/Kabul: HBS 2015; Special issue on Gender and Political Participation in Asia (co-ed. with C. Derichs), in: Femina Politica 02/2013; Chapters on Aung San Suu Kyi and Benazir Bhutto in: Claudia Derichs / Mark R. Thompson (eds.), Dynasties and Female Political Leaders in Asia. Gender, Power and Pedigree, Muenster et al.: LITVerlag 2013*

Single session