

Women's movements under Women Presidents: Bringing a gender perspective to the legal system

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Abstract

Few women have risen to the ranks of heads of state or government worldwide. The low numbers of female presidents and prime ministers in world history have left many untested assumptions about the impact of female leadership on the lives of fellow women. This paper builds upon two bodies of work—studies of female presidencies on the one hand and on women's movement-building, particularly in South and South East Asia, on the other—to focus on the relationship between women leaders and women's movements. Utilising case studies of national law reform during the presidencies of Corazon Aquino (1986-1992) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010) in the Philippines and Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004) in Indonesia and drawing from key informant interviews in both countries, I argue that when women lead, women's movements employ particular strategies to catalyse the passage of 'women-friendly' legislation. Examples of law reform illustrate the power of the female vote to sway presidential decision-making and the flow-on effect of a president who values the participation of fellow women in the government bureaucracy. Yet the relationship between female presidents and the success of movements is neither clear-cut nor linear. Women's movements face opportunities and limitations under the leadership of women presidents, often having to compromise their agendas to achieve a united front.

Key words: women's movements, women presidents, women-friendly legislation, Corazon Aquino, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Megawati Sukarnoputri

Introduction

Few women around the world have risen to the rank of President or Prime Minister. Only 25 women worldwide were occupying executive office as at August 2021. While from 2010-2020, several countries saw their first women leader—including Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Greece, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Thailand and Trinidad and Tobago, with Samoa joining the list in 2021—more than 100 countries have *never* had a woman occupy executive office (Verge and Pastor 2018).

Among those women who have risen to this elite status, rarely have they emerged from local or international women's movements. **[1]** Moreover, a history of activism is not always a status 'owned' by women leaders. Iveta Radičová, for example, the first female Prime Minister of Slovakia (2010-2012), an expert on gender inequality who saw the passage of numerous policies that were beneficial for women' during her tenure, neither focused on her gender nor presented herself as a 'woman's candidate' (Wolchik 2017, 254). This potential distance between leadership and movements is important to acknowledge in the push for more rights-based decision-making by a nation's leader.

Yet this very distance between what are often elite women who occupy executive office and individuals and civil society organisations advocating for change, begs the question whether women presidents offer distinct opportunities for the work of women's movements. Indeed, Hanna Pitkin's seminal book *The Concept of Representation* drew the important distinction between 'standing for' and 'acting for' (Pitkin 1967, 92, 112). While Pitkin's work is missing a gender lens, it is a reminder that it may matter less whether a leader sees her roots as aligned with women's movements ('standing for') and more what they are willing and able to deliver for fellow women in their representational roles ('acting for').

A number of different assumptions persist, in the scholarship and among activists, as to what difference the presence of women in executive office will mean for the advancement of women's rights. Often rising to power as members of families who wield notable political and social power, it may seem unlikely that a woman leader will willingly break the mould and leave a positive legal legacy on women's lives. Competing priorities may burden their leaderships in somewhat fragile periods and often during democratic transitions. Yet for some, a green shoot emerges that women leaders, despite rising to power in a patriarchal and male-centric political system, will carved out space for the needs and interests of women:

A woman leader holding executive power often leads civil society to look forward to having a woman in a decision-making position to create or produce regulations that could really strengthen the rights of women (Civil society activist, Interview 7, Jakarta, 2019).

This 'hope'—and arguably undue expectations—has been acknowledged in scholarly research (Honculada and Pineda Ofreneo 2000, 11). Yet a bigger and largely unexamined question is, what does the presence of a woman in executive office mean for the work of women's movements? Do such movements shift behaviours, practices and priorities when a woman is president?

This article is a response to gaps in our understandings of the relationship that exists between women presidents and women's movements, and to calls for more systematic, comparative research on the relationship between the two. Scholarship on women's movements has seen a significant growth (Beckwith 2013, 411), but nonetheless remains particularly focused on the global North. Studies of different coalitions of women in the global South—women's movements, feminist movements, conservative women's organisations, religious women's affiliations and networks—is growing (see for example Anwar 2004) but remains an ongoing gap in South and Southeast Asia. Moreover, while scholars have sought to provide a deeper explanation for the enactment of gender-based violence laws and policies that goes beyond noting the presence of women in formal politics and policy spaces (Nazneen, Hickey and Sifaki 2019), what can be said of the specific existence of a woman president?

Bringing themes to the comparative theory-building table

Comparative studies of women in presidential office are rare (see for example Jalalzai 2013), with interviews, singular profiles and case studies more common than attempts to aggregate their experiences. [2] Moreover, women leaders in Latin America have received a relatively robust degree of scholarly attention, particularly when one considers the literature in Spanish. [3] The Africa region too – relative to the number of women who have occupied executive office—occupies a notable portion of the scholarship. [4]

Yet the Asia region remains particularly under-analysed in comparative research. The problem here is two-fold: not only is there a gap in analysis of Asian women leaders, but too often the analysis of women leaders from the region relies on frameworks offered

from studies of the global North. In response, this study has deliberately drawn from many pieces of literature from the global South normally not accessible to scholars outside of Indonesia and the Philippines.

A comparative study of women in executive office in Asia has been described as ‘at first glance’ an ‘impossible task given the diversity and heterogeneity of the region, its political systems and cultures, gender ideologies and political developments’ (Fleschenberg 2011, 24). Yet the patterns and trends that emerge particularly regionally make such a study not only highly relevant (Bauer and Tremblay 2011, 7) but essential given women’s global underrepresentation at the executive level. A comparative study proves valuable to extract generally-applicable themes to be placed on the comparative theory-building table.

This article uses the vantage point of three women presidents for its analysis: Maria Corazon Aquino y Cojuangco y Sumulong (hereinafter Corazon Aquino), the Philippines’ first female President (1986-1992); the Philippines’ second female leader, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-2010); and Indonesia’s first and only female President, Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004). These three women leaders completed their tenures many years ago and the contexts in which they led were culturally, socially and politically specific to those countries and moments in time. At the same time, these leaders offer an examination of not only their nation’s first female leader—Presidents Aquino and Megawati—but the ability to compare change over time, spanning two decades in history, and across countries with notable diversity but from the same region.

At the same time, despite overt differences between the two countries and even between the decades under study, commonalities include their colonial histories, with embedded structures of gender, race and class as well as histories of transition. A dearth in scholarship on women’s movements and their engagement with female executives from these countries are further drivers for this research. Importantly, this study brings together the region’s largest predominantly Catholic and predominantly Muslim countries for consideration.

Comparative analysis that seeks to extrapolate broad lessons has significant advantages over single-country studies. Identifying key themes, lessons and tensions can promote the rise of, and research into, future women presidents and prime ministers. As Gywnn Thomas and Melinda Adams note with respect to Chile’s Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010 and again 2014-2018) and Liberia’s Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (2006-2018), analysis of

the perceived successes and failure of women in executive office ‘will certainly shape the gendered opportunities and constraints within their respective countries that women following in their footsteps are likely to encounter’ (Thomas and Adams 2010, 127).

This research is particularly important given the need to offer new frameworks for analysing what women’s leadership may offer for women’s rights advocacy and women’s movements. Moreover, given the absence of in-depth studies that explore the concrete relationship between women’s leadership at the executive level and the processes of law reform, this article offers readers tools to understand the interactions between presidents and civil society in the context of women’s rights law reform.

Framing and definitions

Social movements are ‘sustained, organized, voluntary challenges to established authority’ (Htun and Weldon 2012, 554). Women’s movements are defined by Mala Htun and Laurel S. Weldon as such social movements but with a preponderance of participants and leaders who are women (Htun and Weldon 2012, 554). Here I focus on such movements that advocate for so-called ‘women-friendly’ or ‘gender-responsive’ legislation (Vijayarasa 2019, 277) by lobbying, protesting, creating public disruptions, organising conferences and symposia and making contact with influential business women and women in government (Htun and Weldon 2012, 554).

Scholars have noted the tendency to erroneously conflate ‘women’s movements’, ‘feminist movements’, and ‘women in social movements’ (Beckwith 2000). Moreover, a diversity of interests may exist within women’s movements, as is evident in Indonesia’s advocacy for domestic violence law reform. Less attention has been paid to this spectrum of experiences *within movements*, from feminist to conservative women’s groups (Celis and Childs 2012) or the role of religious women’s movements in women’s rights advocacy.[5] Moreover, one standpoint acknowledges the production of a uniquely Asian, ‘home-grown’ feminism in each Asian country (Roces 2010, 1–2). Yet other scholars, such as Indonesian scholar of women and gender studies, Saparinah Sadli, speaks of an ongoing perception of the irrelevance of non-Indigenous concepts such as ‘feminism’, ‘feminist’ or even ‘gender’ (Sadli 2002, 80).

Informants engaged for this research treaded this topic carefully, acknowledging that there is ‘a diversity of women’s issues and not only one particular issue, only for a certain kind of woman’ (Legal scholar and activist, Interview 8, Jakarta, 2019). That is,

the conservative woman may be—legitimately—representing the interests of one particular sub-set of women. Indeed studies suggest that the road trodden by conservative women’s groups can be pathbreaking for the feminist women’s groups to follow (Baldez 2002, 49). Diversity is central to these case studies, driving a need for compromise to achieve a united front. The case studies presented below affirm political scientist Jill Vicker’s conclusion: ‘although common interests may exist, it is more likely that any aggregate of women has both shared and conflicting interests’ (Vickers 2006, 7).

As a largely unexamined issue—the relationship between women’s leadership and the strategies, successes and failings of women’s movements during the tenures of women presidents—this article seeks to extract common themes and experiences. Four case studies are presented. Each has been drafted with two common goals in mind: first, to highlight strategies employed by women’s movements to achieve the passage of women-friendly legislation; and second, how movements utilised political opportunities to enhance the likelihood of a law or policy’s passage. The case studies demonstrate the possibility of a heightened capacity among women’s movements to initiate policies and achieve their passage when women lead nations and seek to offer some reasons why.

Methods

This research draws from key informants from Indonesia and the Philippines, including a personal communication with former president of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Field visits were conducted in November 2018 (the Philippines) and May 2019 (Indonesia), alongside a handful of interviews taking place virtually in the months preceding and after fieldwork. Informants were selected to capture a broad cross-section of views: from politics, civil society, academia and aid/development. In addition to the former President, this selection included incumbent and former national-level ministers, civil society activists from a cross-section of local non-governmental organisations (feminist, human rights and faith-based) and international non-government organisations (largely focused on politics, justice, electoral monitoring and women’s rights), policy experts from international aid agencies and members of the local academy. Yet, in my experience, these neat categorisations may fail to capture the fluidity with which some scholars and activists in some countries in the global South may identify: ‘We are both academic and activist at the same time and we don’t want to be identified as one or the other’ (Giles 2002 in an interview discussing Sri Lanka).

The interview data [6] provided a rich backdrop against which to consider the contemporary influence of former women Presidents on the lives of women vis-à-vis the law and the institutional changes that may be needed to enable women leaders to deliver better outcomes for women. By engaging in conversations with women who were engaged in the bureaucracy, politics and/or civil society and grassroots activism during the tenures of these three women presidents, but also today, this research attempts to bridge both elite and non-elite women. Incorporating the viewpoints of grassroots women, women feminists and NGO leaders as well as renowned women politicians, this article gratefully builds upon their cross-section of viewpoints.

[insert table 1]

Movements and the passage of women-friendly laws and policies

Four case studies are presented below to undertake this comparative exercise. Trends in the Philippines naturally prompt a search for similar trends in Indonesia. At the same time, multi-country case studies allow us to go beyond experiences in a single country to establish similarities and difference. Finally, these comparisons are sought to help build a theory around women's movements behaviours, opportunities and limitations under women's presidential leadership.

Case study 1: Gender-based violence in Indonesia – The power of movements to shift the Presidential stance

Shifts in the position of President Megawati (2001-2004) in response to advocacy during her tenure reflect the startling capacity of the women's movement to exploit the 'woman's vote'. When the Indonesian women's movement advocated for the enactment of the *Elimination of Violence in the Household Act* (2004), President Megawati was a key target, her support identified as an essential tactic to achieve the law's passage:

We decided that we had to delegitimise Megawati if she doesn't want to sign... If the President does not want to sign, we would call that the instruction of the President (Legal scholar and activist, Interview 8, Jakarta, 2019).

The Legal Aid Foundation of the Indonesian Women's Association for Justice (*Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan*, or LPH APIK Jakarta) led the advocacy and mobilisation process, submitted the Bill and coordinated

mobilisation until 2004. Their strategic collaborations exemplify the fundamental role of women's movements in the enactment of pro-women rights legislation.

For instance, legal assistance provided to victim 'Neneng', whose abuse by her husband and resulting public outcry at his inadequate sentence created a policy window for the law's advocacy. Representatives of women's organisations, academics, religious leaders and law enforcement officials came together in 1997 when LBH APIK Jakarta identified the use of religious texts to delegitimise domestic violence. A draft of the domestic violence bill, based on a comparative literature review of the anti-domestic violence laws and policies in other countries, was produced. Through this process, the term 'household' was recognized as likely to garner greater support for the bill from conservative opposition, unlike the approach of other nations whose laws focus exclusively or largely on the experiences of violence suffered by women.

With the downfall of President Soeharto (1967-1998), a second workshop was organised in 1998 with wider participation. The Advocacy Network to Eradicate Domestic Violence (*Jaringan kerja untuk advokasi penghapusan kekerasan dalam rumah tangga*, JANGKAR) was created, with over 15 organisations that included crisis centres, religious organisations and other service providers. A national network emerged after a further period of advocacy from 1998 to 2002: the National Advocacy Network for the Elimination of Violence against Women, or JANGKA PKTP. Members combed through individual articles of the proposed bill; presenting an internal consensus to the President and law-makers was seen as essential in dealing with potential opposition (Legal scholar and activist, Interview 8, Jakarta, 2019). Survivors were also actively involved.

Religious organisations, including the Council of Churches in Indonesia and *Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama* (the young women's section of the political party, *Nahdlatul Ulama*), who were 'initially sceptical about supporting the mobilization' (Eddyono *et al.* 2016, 38) were engaged. Yet this navigation between women's rights and Islamic discourse saw the interests of certain groups of women sacrificed, for religious and consequently, strategic reasons. The clause on polygamy pushed by feminist advocates was dropped, 'seen as being too much a religiously sensitive issue' (Mahmood 2018, 161) while non-married and homosexual partnerships were also excluded from the law's protection, perceived as sinful in Islam (Mahmood 2018, 162). This example illustrates the necessity among conservative and feminist groups to negotiate. Yet it also places doubt on the extent to which feminist groups in Indonesia were practising intersectional feminism, with

LGBTQA+ groups ultimately excluded from the benefits of law reform. The alternative was an approach that targeted the violence suffered by sexual and gendered minorities broadly, a category which includes women (Otto 2017, 7).

Activists submitted the draft bill to parliament for consideration and not the Megawati government given, in part, that female activist, Tumbu Saraswati, was a Member of Parliament. Saraswati submitted the bill with 32 other members of parliament from nine political parties, after which it was included in the official agenda for the parliamentary plenary session scheduled for 27 January 2003. Yet debate was postponed until May 2003. Subsequently, the May parliamentary plenary requested a Presidential Mandate from President Megawati to start deliberating on the draft Bill. Yet an entire year transpired without action from President Megawati; by May 2004, only months remained before the electoral term ended.

President Megawati, as a result was a target of advocacy right until the law finally received its approval; the description of her signatory on the law as a ‘gift’ for the women’s movement (Mahmood 2018, 154) is unbecoming of the struggle that went before it. It was upon the announcement of her candidacy for President (for the period 2004–2009)—a bid that was ultimately unsuccessful despite the forecast of her success (Horowitz 2013, 120)—that President Megawati’s stance shifted. The women’s movement threatened to withdraw support for the President without her approval for the bill’s passage. The President finally issued the desired mandate in June. In September 2004, one month prior to the end of President Megawati’s term, the law was passed:

In the last months of the end of the Presidency, the Parliament stopped discussing the bill and then it passed. Because at the time, we tried to say to the President, ‘This is your last period. Why don’t you give the best for Indonesia?’ (Legal scholar and activist, Interview 8, Jakarta, 2019)

Several key strategies were employed during this final push. The mass media’s extensive publication of the debates gave significant visibility to the women activists who filled the balconies—‘balcony parliaments’—during the bill’s deliberations [7] (Eddyono *et al.* 2016, 40). The newly-established Women’s Caucus in Parliament—‘enthusiastic to support the bill’—was effective (Politician, Interview 11, Jakarta, 2019), while the Government’s National Commission on Violence against Women, formed in 1998, directly lobbied parliamentarians and the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus. In turn, women members of parliament constantly informed and updated the National Commission on

the progress of the debate (Legal scholar and activist, Interview 8, Jakarta, 2019). The influence of sister nations was also acknowledged: 'We knew that other countries like Malaysia and the Philippines already had a domestic violence law,' which further prompted civil society's momentum (Civil society activist, Interview 7, Jakarta, 2019). The police were also contributors (Civil society activist, Interview 7, Jakarta, 2019).

The law's passage was deemed a 'quick', almost 'instant' one in comparative terms (Activist and political aspirant, Interview 9, Jakarta, 2019). By contrast, Indonesia's *Marriage Law* (Law No. 1 of 1974) was discussed and designed by the women's movement from around 1899 until its passage in 1974: 'It took 75 years. This domestic violence act took seven' (Civil society activist, Interview 7, Jakarta, 2019).

Case study 2: Indonesia's women's movement and the enactment of the gender equality quota – A story of persistence

Indonesia's passage of a (non-binding) gender equality quota during President Megawati's tenure (2001-2004) once again illustrates the capacity of the women's movement to sway what otherwise appears to be a firm stance from the President. Activists in Indonesia have long been concerned with the low rates of participation of women in politics, a sphere largely dominated by men and with structural factors further inhibiting women's greater participation (Civil society activist, Interview 6, Jakarta, 2019).

President Megawati, the chair of her party and as the only female President in the nation's history, might have appeared a natural ally in the reform process. Instead, she urged Indonesian women to fight without begging for equal rights, forgetting, in the eyes of many the privileged path she herself had trod (Soetjipto 2004, 51). In her view, a quota was a discriminatory method of attempting to achieve equality (Soetjipto 2004, 51). In turn, on two specific occasions in late 2000 and early 2001, President Megawati directed women activists not to press for a quota (Soetjipto 2004, 79).

In short, the first woman President of Indonesia did not express a clear belief in the capacity of women to work in parliament or in senior positions. While the movement for the gender equality quota was gaining publicity and support, President Megawati openly viewed the quota as showing 'unrealistic progress on the part of women', as a tool that would weaken the institutions for which it was sought and as a strategy that risked creating 'new discrimination against men' (Siregar 2005, 46). Quotas, in the President's

view, were counterproductive and would undermine the dignity of women, while any advancement secured as a result of quotas was seen to be neither genuine nor sustainable (Bessell 2004, 12).

Multiple attempts had been made to enact into law a gender equality quota. Women's groups had hoped to see the quota introduced in the *Law on Political Parties* (No. 31/ 2002). Mass organisations banded together with NGOs to form a large network, a Group of Women Concerned about Politics (*Kelompok Perempuan Peduli Politik*). Joint workshops were organised with the Department of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Women's Empowerment that were attended by vice-governors of provinces, delegates of provincial parliaments and representatives of NGOs. Dialogues were organised with political parties, the National Electoral Commission fractions and the Special Committee for the Laws on Political Parties and General Elections (Panitia Khusus or *Pansus*) (Siregar 2005:48). Ultimately, unsuccessful in that pursuit, some scholars view the advocacy period as beneficial for having 'brought the gender issue into the political arena in a totally new way' (Soetjipto 2004, 77). Moreover, at least five political parties—*Golongan karya*, *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, *Partai Amanat Nasional*, *FKKI* and *Reformasi*—were supportive of the women's position in the quota debate. President Megawati's party was not among them.

Activists turned to debates for a new electoral law at which point internal disagreement about the end goal had to be overcome—a 20 per cent quota that might have been more politically palatable and feasible, or 30 per cent quota, based on the experiences of other countries as being the bare minimum that was needed to achieve voice (Siregar 2005, 48). The Indonesian women's movements drew strength from other key actors. Collaborations were made with two caucuses for female politicians: the Caucus of Women of Indonesian Political Parties (*Kaucus Perempuan Partai Politik Indonesia* or KPPI) and Caucus of Women in Parliament (*Kaucus Perempuan Parlemen* or KPI) (Siregar 2005, 48). The 'balcony parliament' or 'balcony fraction' was again employed again as a key strategy (Siregar 2005, 44). [7] For some activists, Indonesia's ratification and domestication of CEDAW (via Law No. 7/1984) and policy of gender mainstreaming in government (through Presidential Instruction No. 9/2000 on Gender Mainstreaming) helped justify the proposal for a gender equality quota for women in law (Dewi 2018, 323).

In 2003 and with the 2004 election looming, President Megawati moved away from her opposition to a quota. In turn, advocates for the quota succeeded, after this long struggle, in obtaining a 30 per cent non-compulsory quota in the Indonesian *Law on General Elections* (No. 12/2003), Article 65 [8]. Despite her opposition, one informant described the law as the ‘most important law’ introduced during President Megawati’s time (Former minister and current civil servant, Interview 12, Jakarta, 2019). By contrast, other scholars name President Megawati’s opposition to the quotas as one of the biggest defeats for the Indonesia Women’s Coalition for Justice and Democracy (Suryakusuma and Tribune 2003), attributing her lack of support for the quota to the male-dominated political culture and the ‘woefully inadequate’ influence of women in politics in Indonesia today (Monshipouri 2011, 209).

Representation of women in Indonesian politics remains low despite the introduction of further laws in the years following: a *Law on Political Parties* (No. 2/2008) which requires women to compose 30 per cent of each party’s managing officers and a minimum of 30 per cent of candidate lists for the legislature. These reforms, in both 2004 and 2008, are viewed as largely ineffective (Prihatini 2019). Informants, including women politicians who have directly benefited from them, see party nominations as simply a ‘matter of numbers’ with ‘anyone’ nominated (Executive Director, NGO, Interview 10, Jakarta, 2019). The law is ultimately based on ‘good will’ (Executive Director, NGO, Interview 10, Jakarta, 2019) and in turn, has been described as ‘a kind of delusion for women activists’ (Activist and political aspirant, Interview 9, Jakarta, 2019). Nor has the law seen a real shift in numbers which appear to have plateaued in Indonesia around between 14 and 18 per cent (Former commissioner of the National Commission on Violence against Women, Interview 13, Jakarta, 2019).

Case study 3: The Philippines Development Plan for Women – A story of behind-the-scenes feminist activism

President Aquino (1986-1992) has been widely acknowledged as a leader who valued the expertise, opinions and voice of feminist activists: ‘Though Cory Aquino was not a feminist she was “instinctively supportive” of women’s causes’ (Honculada and Pineda Ofreneo 2003, 138). Particularly remarkable was President Aquino’s tendency to open the door for renowned NGO staffers who had a long history of activism to be proposed as candidates for government office (Former Chair of the NCRFW, scholar and

activist, Interview 2, Manila, 2018; Academic, Gender Studies, Interview 5, Manila, 2018). Notably, President Aquino 'had progressive women around her, in the palace', some of whom were the most active opponents to the former President Marcos (1965-1986) (Former Chair of the NCRFW, scholar and activist, Interview 2, Manila, 2018).

This case study, concerning the creation of the Philippines Development Plan for Women (PDPW) 1989-1992, evidences the benefits reaped by an inclusive president who actively sought to appoint women to key decision-making roles. The PDPW served as the government's blueprint for integrating women into the development processes. The Plan's development reflects the open dialogue that existed behind the scenes of the bureaucracy between the women's movement and the Corazon Aquino administration.

President Aquino appointed Patricia Licuanan as Chairperson of the National Commission of the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) for most of her presidency, a known early advocate for women's rights. During President Aquino's time, other key figures included Senator Shahani and Remy (Remedios) Rikken, NCRFW Executive Director, a figure who was key in ensuring the principle of fundamental equality before the law for women was inserted into the 1987 Freedom Constitution (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018). Solita Monsod (popularly known as Winnie) had been appointed by President Aquino as head of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA).

Credit for a gender perspective to the MTPDP is given in recounts to this handful of Aquino-appointed feminist bureaucrats, as well as feminist legislators, in their interactions with women's organisations. One informant shared in great detail what occurred behind the scenes to bring a gender perspective to that document (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018). Senator Shahani visited Remy Rikken, a co-founder and coordinator of NGO 'PILIPINA', in her office to share the news that the MTPDP was about to be issued and declared, 'Women need to be in that document':

They visited Winnie [Solita Monsod] who had been put in charge of the MTPDP. The Plan had gone through a consultation process, where different departments put their programmes and their targets, per sector – health, education, public works, agriculture, the environment, trade, the usual chapters of the development plan. Of course, there was nothing on women there (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018).

Having been through full consultation, the MTPDP was in its final stages and there was an acknowledged need to strategize and act quickly:

Senator Shahani wrote, 'Women, who compose half of the population, must be effectively mobilised'. They took that sentence to Winnie, as the Director General of NEDA and convinced her to put in that sentence (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018).

This women-centred statement was inserted into the framework of the introductory chapter, thereby governing all other chapters of the MTPDP:

So if you have that one powerful sentence, that would give a signal. That was just an initial in-road to 'talking women' in a traditionally gender-neutral institution. NEDA (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018).

The process by which a gender perspective was brought to the document reflects the significance of the appointments made by President Aquino:

The experience of us there, who came from the NGO into the government, that's what we bring into government. A background of activism in NGOs and the passion for pushing for laws (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018).

The willingness of the President to carve out roles in government for women to be filled by vocal gender experts proved to be mutually beneficial.

Case study 4: The Philippines Anti-Violence against Women and their Children Act – From Senate Bill to Presidential signature

The 2004 *Anti-Violence against Women and Children Act* (Republic of the Philippines 2004) was one of the most important legislative outputs for women of Macapagal Arroyo's tenure (2001-2010). Many scholars describe the central role of '[f]eminists from all campaigns' (Roces 2012, 112) who underwent a 'difficult and tedious process' over eight years to achieve the law's passage (Roces 2012, 10, 112). Credit for the law's enactment is often also accorded to the party 'Abanse! Pinay', a party filled with activists from PILIPINA and generally understood to be a woman's party (Roces 2012, 10), and in turn, *Republic Act No. 7941* of 1998 (during the tenure of Fidel Ramos, 1992-1998) which reserved 20 per cent of the total number of seats in the House of Representatives to 'marginalized and underrepresented sectors, organizations and parties' that in turn

helped facilitate the participation of legislators who were able to push through bills such as this one (Hega, Alporha, and Evangelista 2017, 9).

Nonetheless, as remarked by the President herself (Personal Communication with Former President Macapagal Arroyo, Interview 1, 2021), as Senator, she authored the ‘Anti-Battering Bill’ (Senate Bill 731). Early in her tenure as President, at an International Women’s Day event on 8 March 2001, President Macapagal Arroyo called for the re-filing in Congress of that ‘Anti-Battering Bill’ (Felongco 2001). While activists and scholars may debate the degree to which that bill can be considered a pre-cursor to the law that followed, an assessment of the President’s legal legacy cannot overlook her role, both as Senator and at the tail-end of the process, as Presidential signatory in the final step of the law’s passage.

The President too has recognized the role of civil society in lobbying for the passage of the law and their close work with her administration to address the issue (Macapagal Arroyo 2004a, 3). At the time, women’s groups underwent extensive periods of negotiation and compromise among themselves. This is a natural state and not necessarily one that demands criticism: ‘the women’s movement is not a homogenous group...women’s movements grow because they respect diversity of opinions’ (Muñez 2004, 190).

Foremost among the seasoned activists and human rights advocate—who ‘were friends and shared common feminist principles’ and brought individual experience as advocates for law reform (Muñez 2004, 187)—was the Collective Initiative of Women for Transformation of Laws and Society (*Sama-samang Inisyatiba ng Kababaihan Para sa Pagbabago ng Batas at Lipunan*, SIBOL). SIBOL produced an Anti-Abuse of Women in Intimate Relationships (Anti-AWIR) Bill, a draft seen as better articulate the specific legislative demands of women (Muñez 2004, 187). Yet in reality, two alternative versions of the law had been produced by different women’s organisations, reflecting the plurality of interests among women’s groups:

From the ‘Anti-Violence against Women’ more progressive groups we had one bill, and from the ‘Domestic Violence’ more conservative groups, we had another. What [Aurora Javate De Dios] [9] did was call them to her house over lunch and said, ‘We need to pass this law, but as NGOs, you have to have a united voice when we lobby congress. (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018)

A consensus was reached to back the 'Anti-Violence against Women' law first, one that focused solely on women in violent relationships violated by their partners (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018).

While often not described in these terms, the movement's collaborative strategy was somewhat stifled when Pat Sarenas of the House Representatives, from the Abanse Pinay party—a woman's party—filed her own bill, known as the Anti-Domestic Violence Bill (Muñez 2004, 189). Yet today, informants who were active in the women's movement at the time are quick to acknowledge the pivotal role that individual female legislators played in the passage of the final women-centred law. 'It was like an elevator pitch' (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018), shared one informant, discussing the lobbying of Senator Loren Legarda to have the term 'family' removed and changed to 'children'. The ultimate goal was to hone in on the well-being of women; the inclusion of 'children' was not aimed at addressing violence against children but rather 'the perpetrator using the child to have power over the women' (Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, Interview 3, Manila, 2018).

Rowena Guanzon, incumbent Commissioner of Elections, was another named individual, helping the Philippines Commission on Women advocate for both the domestic violence and anti-trafficking laws as an independent while Bellaflor Angara, former Member of the Philippines House of Representatives was named as a 'champion' (Executive Director, NGO, Interview 4, Manila, 2018). Both reflect the positive role played by women legislators in the enactment of women-friendly laws.

Plurality of views within the women's movements are unsurprising. Ultimately the story lends itself to a lesson in the ways in which legislative processes demand from women's organisations a coherent position to maximise the willingness of women legislators to push forward the enactment of women-friendly laws. In her role as President, in many respects, Macapagal-Arroyo did not weigh-in on these debates. Yet the *Anti-Violence against Women and Children Act* is among the President's self-described successes (Personal Communication with Former President Macapagal Arroyo, Interview 1, 2021). In fact, the former President describes the law as the "Anti-Battering Bill" which she authored but '...passed with a larger scope'. While few activists today are willing to accord the President credit for the law's passage, neither do they suggest that she

blocked, stalled or inhibited the process; rather movements were left to debate and lobby at will.

Comparative lessons

Here we return to the core question at the heart of this article: does women's leadership necessarily create new opportunities for women's movements and what lessons emerge from these case studies of the particular strategies employed by movements when women lead?

The rapid passage of gender-responsive laws

Many informants across both the Philippines and Indonesia spoke of years of activism that culminated in the passage of laws during the *specific* tenures of women presidents. Under President Megawati in particular it was remarked: 'In Indonesia, it took 13 to 15 years to actually pass the domestic violence law, but it was during 2004, through President Megawati, that the women were actually able to mobilise the resources to pass that legislation' (Former commissioner of the National Commission on Violence against Women, Interview 13, Jakarta, 2019). These studies offer indicators that a woman's rise to presidential office may instil in women's movements a sense of urgency to mobilise resources at a faster pace and maximise the entry points and opportunities that arise when women occupy their nation's highest level of leadership.

This catalysing effect can be evidenced in Indonesia's domestic violence law (activism commencing in 1997 and the law passed in 2004), and its non-compulsory gender equality quota (activism peaked after the turn of the century, with the law passing in 2003). At the same time, is important to recall that the woman's vote was not always persuasive. Much sought for law reform, for example, to the restrictive access to abortion did not pass under President Megawati. The unsuccessful lobby efforts to enhance women's safe and legal access to abortion under her tenure left a clear blight on the President's legacy on women's lives (Vijayarasa 2020).

The power of the woman voter over the woman president

Arguably insufficient attention is paid to the ability of the 'woman's vote' to sway a presidential leader to lend their support to a particular legislative or policy agenda. The two Indonesian case studies reflect a profound shift in the position of President

Megawati. Fear of losing the female vote in the 2004 Presidential election was a prevailing tool yielded by the movement.

Studies of other presidential women have identified the sway that the vote of the 'women collective' can provide. In these contexts, credit has been given to women voters in the *rise* of women to executive office. For instance, Michelle Bachelet of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018) came to power at a time when the country was moving towards a modern democracy, coupled with a stated goal of ensuring better inclusion of groups previously excluded from politics (Thomas and Adams 2010, 106). Bachelet's success was aided by a climate in which a greater role was envisaged for women to play in society and politics (Ríos Tobar 2007, 26). In turn, the female vote made a significant difference in her election: the notion of 'Vote mujer!' (Vote Woman!) had taken hold (Ríos Tobar 2009, 36).

The collective participation of women was instrumental too in President Aquino's own rise to power. The mass organisation formed to support her Presidential campaign, known as 'Cory's Crusaders' eventually became a people's movement (Col 2013, 19). A vibrant women's movement was still needed to keep pressure on Bachelet through her tenure (Franceschet 2006, 201) as was the case during the 'Aquino years' and is well demonstrated, again, in the two case studies of Indonesia.

Women inside government

While under presidential systems, a president executes the final act – their signature – that sees through the passage of a law, we cannot overlook the importance of feminists within parliaments and the government in the process of law reform. Research on the difference women legislators make and what priorities and preferences they bring to the table is imperfect due to small datasets, the complex realities of politics, including party loyalty and where one identifies on the spectrum from liberal to conservative. Yet analysis over different decades and in different jurisdictions has suggested a link between the increased presence of women in politics and positive investments in policies such as health and in women, the poor, children, the disabled and elderly. [10]

President Aquino's leadership illustrates the value of having women in 'dual' leadership roles, as a President alongside feminist advisors to whom the president is willing to lend an ear. The passage of Indonesia's *Elimination of Violence in the Household Act* in 2004 was aided by Member of Parliament Saraswati. The pivotal role of party

politics, with at least five political parties in Indonesia lending their support to the gender equality quota, must not be overlooked in this analysis, even if the President's own party was initially unwilling to back the bill.

The pivotal role of women's movements

A final note is needed to provide balance. In seeking to draw an understanding of the relationship between women's movements and women executives, women's movements remain pivotal. Indeed research by Weldon and Htun shows that strong, vibrant domestic feminist movements play the most fundamental role in driving policy change – more significant than left-wing parties, the numbers of women legislators, or even national wealth (Weldon and Htun 2013, 231). The four case studies offer insights into how women's groups wield power, over female presidents as well as other actors in the political system.

There is much to learn from these case studies on the strategies adopted by women's movements. Co-beneficial alliance building between women's groups and women's parliamentary bodies in their various forms has been acknowledged in earlier studies (Sawer, Palmieri and Freidenvall 2013). Collaboration among feminist activists, women in the legislature and 'femocrats' in 'triangles of empowerment' facilitates the development and implementation of gender-responsive laws and policies (Holli 2008, 169).

While 'femocrats' is non-Indigenous language to the countries under study, the Philippines and Indonesia both offer evidence of the very significant role potentially played by feminist bureaucrats and legislators in navigating the halls that are often closed-off to the majority of women's movements activists. In this sense, this collaboration allowed feminist or women's rights-leaning bureaucrats and legislators to pick-up where movement activists necessarily have to leave off. While research documents well the important role of 'sympathetic' male advocates (Palmieri 2013), these examples illustrate the important role played by women yielding power in politics possibly over and above male legislators.

Discussing the value of alliance building is important too for acknowledging the limits of women's movements. In the words of one Indonesia informant:

The women's movement is not always heroic. That's not life, that only women's movement can achieve change. It depends too on the different levels of effort by the women's movement (Legal scholar and activist, Interview 8, Jakarta, 2019).

Questioning the hero-status of women's movements arguably best applies Perhaps this statement best applies to the case of Indonesia, where the rights of women in same-sex relations to freedom from gender-based violence was foregone to guarantee the passage of the *Elimination of Violence in the Household Act*.

Yet it is important for a study of this kind to acknowledge the role played by what may be considered more 'conservative' groups in aiding the advancement of the feminist agenda. Their expertise brought a stronger understanding of what was needed in Indonesia to secure the passage of laws, including calls to change terminology – the use of 'household'. At the same time, where compromise leads to the exclusion of the interests of particularly groups of women, including women in same-sex relationships, some advocates may argue that the sacrifices are too great and display an unwillingness to live up to feminist principles that acknowledge women's multiple identities.

These case studies reflect the capacity of movements to exploit the politics of the day and the political agendas of the women president. A diversity of standpoints naturally drives a need for compromise. Without such consensus, movements risk that division will be exploited by opponents.

Conclusion

The notion that the presence of a *woman* leader may mean new and distinct opportunities for the advocacy of women's movements may be self-evident, particular given the acknowledged expectations that woman leaders do more and lead better for fellow women (Vijayarasa 2022). These four case studies, albeit distinct, hint at the possibility that women's movements pursue particular strategies when a woman occupies executive office. Women's groups can exploit the power of a woman's vote. Activists, often under the leadership of prominent women leaders, bureaucrats or legislators, seek to debate, mobilise and unite with the greatest degree of consensus manageable, to translate these opportunities into positive legal and policy developments.

Unsurprisingly, some of the strategies employed are common to the work of women's movements irrespective of whether a woman lead. Drawing mass media attention, balcony parliaments and the oscillation between more radical and conservative

standpoints are among them. Nonetheless, the data, although selective, suggests a catalysing effect of having a woman lead a nation, where activists and allies work with greater momentum to garner the support for a law's passage. Indonesia's law to end domestic violence (with activism commencing around 1997 and the law passing in 2004) and the introduction of a non-compulsory gender equality quota (activism reaching a peak just after the turn of the century and the law passing in 2003) as well as the Filipino anti-violence law (activism reaching new heights in the 1990s, with the law enacted in 2004), all point in this direction.

This analysis, as one of the few comparative studies that links law, leadership and movement advocacy, leaves a sense that the presence of women in executive office may mean distinct possibilities, opportunities and expectations, when women lead. There may then need to be a place on the 'triangle of empowerment' for the female president, albeit case-specific and at times unpredictable.

Notes

[1] The word 'movements' is used in plurality to reflect the different movements that existed across Indonesia and the Philippines, but also within each country. This is particularly important given that this article addresses the agendas of both what are at times seen as 'radical' organisations, what are labelled 'feminist' organisations as well as conservative or often religious-based women's movements.

[2] For another example, see the valuable edited collection of Janet Martin and MaryAnne Borrelli from 2016, which contains some chapters that are comparative but the majority of which remain single-country case studies, with a particular focus on the U.S.A.

[3] For example [see for example Acosta, Vesga and Mayorga 2019; Gómez Pinzón 2017; Poncela 2012; Rodríguez Escalante 2011; Ruiz Seisdedos and Grande Gascón 2015; Valencia 2015; Valenzuela 2015.](#)

[4] For example, Adams 2008; Anderson, Diabah and Mensa 2011; Chikaipa 2019; Ettang 2014; Groot 2016; Kamwendo and Kamwendo 2012.

[5] The term conservative is often used in the women's rights negatively. The term is used here to acknowledge the non-monolithic category of women and women's interests. Susan Blackburn, scholar of Indonesia, in a paper on the 'politics of Islam' uses the language of 'political moderates' and 'political radicals'. For Blackburn, 'moderates' as those who work towards their goals through reforms within the existing political system, while radicals reject

the system and work outside it' (Blackburn 2008, 84–85). At times, my use of the term 'conservative' may align with Blackburn's language of moderates. Blackburn noted how, at the end of the 20th Century (and nearing the start of President Megawati's tenure) women were 'scarcely heard' among the ranks of radical Islam but had found a voice within moderate Islam 'ever more vocal and active' (Blackburn 2008, 85), reflecting how 'conservative' or 'moderate' movements may prove important spaces for women's participation and advocacy.

[6] All interviews were conducted in English, recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed. The data was analysed to derive theories, what is commonly known as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1968). Such an approach begins with prior assumptions, with levels of richer analysis added, at times validating and at other times, contradicting these assumptions (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

[7] Informants referred to 'balcony parliaments' to describe the occupation of the balconies of parliaments by large numbers of women activists. Their presence drew media interest and helped bolster awareness– and support – for the cause.

[8] Article 65 stated, 'Every political party in the elections may propose candidates for members of the national, provincial and local parliaments for each electoral district with consideration for at least 30 per cent of women's representation' (Siregar 2005, 37)

[9] Known to her friends as Oyie, Aurora Javate de Dios is a key figure in the Filipino women's rights movement. Now largely retired from public life, Oyie is the Executive Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) – Asia Pacific; former Chairperson of the National Commission of the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW); and was an Associate Professor at Miriam College in the Philippines and Executive Director of the Women and Gender Institute at Miriam College.

[10] For more see Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Courtemanche and Green 2017; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003.

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Key informant interviews

A full list of interviews is on file with the author. Only interviews cited in the article are listed here.

Interview 1. Personal Communication, Former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, April 2021, Virtual.

Interview 2. Former Chair of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, scholar and activist, November 2018, Manila, Philippines.

Interview 3. Former Executive Director, Philippine Commission on Women, November 2018, Manila, Philippines.

Interview 4. Executive Director, Women's legal and human rights non-governmental organisation, November 2018, Manila, Philippines.

Interview 5. Director of Women and Gender Studies, University of Philippines, November 2018, Manila, Philippines.

Interview 6. Civil society activist, Indonesian Women's Rights Coalition, May 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 7. Civil society activist, Indonesian Women's Rights Non-Governmental Organisation, May 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 8. Legal scholar and activist, Gadjah Mada University (UGM), Yogyakarta, April 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 9. Activist and political aspirant, May 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 10. Executive Director of Non-Governmental Organisation on Electoral Reform and Democracy, May 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 11. Politician – Member of People’s Representative Council, April 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 12. Former Indonesian Minister and civil servant of an inter-governmental organisation, May 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia.

Interview 13. Former Commissioner of the National Commission on Violence against Women, April 2019, Jakarta, Indonesia. “

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