

Article

# Political Pathways and Performance of Women Opposition Leaders in Indonesia and South Korea

Nankyung Choi

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands; [n.choi@vu.nl](mailto:n.choi@vu.nl)

Submitted: 24 August 2022 | Accepted: 13 December 2022 | Published: 22 February 2023

## Abstract

While some world regions have seen women opposition leaders with no ties to political families rise to national leadership, in East Asia, women opposition leaders who ascend to national executive positions have been largely limited to the wives, daughters, or sisters of prominent male politicians. Locally, however, there have been some broadening and diversification of women who seek and win executive office through oppositional politics. Given the small number of women opposition leaders who have gained leadership positions in the government, this article develops an interpretive study of the relationship between becoming “critical actors” and doing “critical acts” as women opposition leaders. Using four illustrative cases of women who have pursued executive power through oppositional politics, this article questions whether and how the variation in women’s pathways affects their exercise of power in Indonesia and South Korea, two young though consolidating democracies in East Asia. Drawing on the biographies and policies of two presidents (Megawati Soekarnoputri and Park Geun-hye) and two mayors (Tri Rismaharini and Kim Soo-young) it shows that local women opposition leaders use their executive leadership to initiate and implement public policies, unlike their national counterparts whose pathways and performance are intertwined with family background. By doing so, the article sheds light on the complex nexus between political pathways and performance of women opposition leaders.

## Keywords

Indonesia; political pathways; political performance; South Korea; substantive representation; women opposition leader

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Women Opposition Leaders: Pathways, Patterns, and Performance” edited by Sarah C. Dingler (University of Innsbruck), Ludger Helms (University of Innsbruck), and Henriette Müller (New York University Abu Dhabi).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

## 1. Introduction

In East Asia, instances of women who gain executive political office through oppositional politics remain rare and poorly understood. Still, less is known about such women’s performance once in power and whether and how they promote the interests of women in their specific sociocultural contexts. In the small volume of scholarship on this subject, the focus has tended to remain at the national level, where instances of women who gain executive office have not only been few but are mostly from elite backgrounds, with Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen as a notable exception. Comparatively less is known about women who have sought and won executive political office through oppositional politics at local

levels, even as instances of such women appear to be growing and come from more diverse backgrounds than their national counterparts. As a contribution to research on women and political opposition, this article develops an exploratory analysis of four women opposition leaders who have won and exercised political power at the national and local levels in Indonesia and South Korea (hereafter Korea).

Until recently, East Asian women’s participation in oppositional politics has been strongly associated with sociopolitical movements aimed at overthrowing authoritarian regimes, as the region has been and remains overwhelmingly authoritarian. In this context, Indonesia and Korea stand out as two young but consolidating democracies. Modes of political opposition in both countries

have shifted from insurgent social movements-based to party-based forms and opposition party leadership has emerged as an important stepping-stone to the executive. However, the consolidation of formally democratic political institutions is in itself uninformative concerning its implications for women in opposition politics and their experiences in seeking and using executive power. Do women executives arising from opposition politics signify the quality of democracy and improvements in gender inequality? As such, an examination of women executives rising through oppositional paths in these countries represents an opportunity to contribute to the scholarship on women opposition leaders and executive leadership in newly democratizing polities.

With their recent history of democratic transition, distinctive cultural features, and shared and specific gendered patterns of politics, Indonesia and Korea represent particularly interesting settings in which to explore the experiences of women who have sought, won, and exercised political power through oppositional politics. Using a comparative approach focused on the experiences of four individuals, the article addresses two questions. First, what are the differences in women's pursuit of executive power through oppositional paths at the national and local levels of governance? Second, do such differences in women's political pathways shape their performance once in office, and if yes, how?

Addressing these questions, this article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the challenges of studying women's opposition leaders and explains the analytical framework employed in this study. The second section examines national women opposition leaders, while the third concerns local women opposition leaders. The conclusion summarizes arguments developed through the empirical analysis and their implications for theory and future research. Overall, the article shows that local women opposition leaders pursue and use executive leadership for specific issues and advocacies while pathways and policy performance of their national counterparts are intertwined with family background. By doing so, the article sheds light on the complex nexus between political pathways and performance of women opposition leaders.

## 2. Women Opposition Leaders' Political Pathways and Performance

Understanding women's efforts to gain executive political power through participation in oppositional politics and using that power in promoting women's interests encounters numerous problems owing to both the relative paucity of relevant literature and methodological challenges. Complicating matters, there are multiple ways of understanding and studying how women pursue political power and this, in turn, requires analysis of features of women in oppositional politics in different country contexts. As a small-n comparative and interpretative study, this analysis does not aim to make

general causal statements about women opposition leaders in general or in Indonesia and Korea. Instead, the analysis uses four illustrative cases of women who have pursued political office through oppositional politics to understand whether and how the variation in women's pathways affects their exercise of power.

Research on women political leaders is scant but growing, with the number of women in leadership positions increasing recently. Still, the literature on women holding executive positions remains focused on women at the national level of governance (e.g., Madsen, 2015; Montecinos, 2017; Skard, 2014; Wiltse & Hager, 2021). Among women political leaders, those who began their political careers by representing opposition parties and rose to power through a popular election have been particularly rare and there is only isolated work on them (e.g., Lubina, 2020). By contrast, there is little scholarly literature focused on women who rise to local government leadership through oppositional politics. Understanding what these women do once in office poses additional challenges.

The small number of women opposition leaders deters any attempt to study them in a systematic manner. An alternative approach is to develop and theorize a small number of cases in specific contexts so that we can better understand "what *specific actors* do" and why rather than "what '*women*' do" in general (Childs & Krook, 2009, p. 126, emphasis added). Complementing such an approach, Childs and Krook (2009, p. 127) propose a framework for addressing "the diversity among women and the importance of individuals who resolve to act on behalf of women as a group." Central to this framework is identifying the "critical actors" who are assumed to "act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change" (Childs & Krook, 2009, p. 127). While Childs and Krook's framework concerns women legislators' substantive representation in promoting policies for women, this article extends it to women executives who theoretically have greater influence over policy-making (Jalalzai, 2016). As empirical studies show that women political leaders are frequently indifferent or reluctant to challenge the prevailing patriarchal gender ideology (Derichs et al., 2006; Everett, 2014; Richter, 1990), it is important and interesting to see whether and how women opposition leaders perform differently in acting on behalf of other women.

What would make women executives engage in "critical acts," or initiatives that "change the position of the minority and lead to further changes" (Childs & Krook, 2009, p. 138)? Comparing twenty women presidents in office in 2010, Jalalzai (2010) looks into the relations between their institutional paths and outcomes of exercising powers. One of the findings is that how the woman president comes to power, whether through a popular election or a party ticket, may explain her role in policy-making and representing women substantively. Some women have proven to be able to become dominant presidents, but, in East Asia, the pathway to

national leadership positions has been generally (except in Taiwan) limited to women possessing familial ties to powerful male politicians. This suggests “continued constraints on women’s abilities to break through to power” at the national level (Jalalzai, 2010, p. 153). By contrast, by lowering our gaze to the local level where women with no family ties have risen to powerful positions, we can appreciate different modalities through which women juxtapose agency and constraints in manifesting their political leadership.

The relations between women’s, and especially women opposition leaders’, pathways to power and their performance once in office have been scarcely explored. Women’s political pathways refer to mechanisms by which women decide to pursue political office and power, explore options, mobilize resources, develop networks or relationships with constituents, and build distinctive political styles (Choi, 2019). Among diverse pathways, women executives seem to rise via either elite pathways in which women’s assumption of power is often “mediated” by male relatives or grassroots pathways in which women’s political careers are “shaped from the beginning by their own choices, attributes and efforts, grounded in a strong sense of their own political efficacy” (Fleschenberg, 2008, p. 35). So, this article compares women opposition leaders of elite and grassroots pathways at different levels of governance. Women of elite pathways tend to rely on the reputations and powers of their male relatives, while women of grassroots pathways often take on specific issues or advocacies. Surely the contexts and modalities of rising to power do not solely explain the style, content, and impact of women’s leadership. Still, the modalities of women’s pursuit of political office are assumed to at least partly explain different outcomes between becoming “critical actors” and doing “critical acts.” This seems particularly so in the cases of women opposition leaders in the third wave democracies as they often emerge not as power-seekers but because of their cause.

However, there is no clear consensus on how to examine women’s political performance. Disaggregating political performance is complex (Rai, 2014), and evaluating women’s political performance has its own methodological and analytical challenges (Celis, 2010). Women’s political performance has to be defined not only personally but also institutionally and culturally because it depends not only on women leaders’ motivations, political capital, or life experiences but also on the degrees of institutional and cultural tolerance or resistance to gender equality policies (Curtin, 2008; Goetz, 2009). Women leaders’ knowledge of, interest in, and ability to articulate women’s interests are necessary but often insufficient. As Jalalzai (2016, p. 22) points out, it is important to consider the “gender context” in which women political leaders arise in assessing “whether women in political positions represented anomalies or proved commonplace.” Even once in office, women still face profound institutional and cultural obstacles to advancing

their agendas in general and women’s issues in particular. Moreover, “women’s interests” are not something “that exist ‘out there,’ ready to be brought into the representational process” and are often the subject of heated and contentious political debates (Celis et al., 2008, p. 101; see also, Vincent, 2010).

Considering these challenges and given the limited space, this article limits its focus to women executives’ substantive representation of women—i.e., the use of executive powers in representing women’s issues and in initiating or executing women-friendly policies (Jalalzai, 2016, p. 219). The executive is often considered the most masculine branch of government (Duerst-Lahti, 1997). In a political system where women have to gain executive office through a popular vote (as in Indonesia and Korea), the public expectations about the masculinist operation of the executive office often constrain not only women candidates’ chances for attaining the office but also how they exercise power after ascending to it. In a recent study, Indonesia’s local women executives point out the gender bias embedded in political parties as the biggest challenge to their political leadership (Novitasari et al., 2021). When women become executives, the office and power also become the subject of gendered norms and power relations. In evaluating women executives’ substantive representation of women, therefore, it is important to bear in mind that women have to overcome the obstacles and impediments resulting from the rhetoric and expectations built by men who have dominated the political world and thus do not face the same impediments.

In East Asia, Indonesia and Korea are two of the few countries that have recently had women presidents who began their political careers as opposition leaders and also have a modestly growing number of women mayors, including those from opposition parties. Pursuing a paired comparison (Tarrow, 2010), the following two sections analyze and compare women as opposition leaders at the national and local level in terms of what kinds of opposition leaders they were, how they rose to power, and what they did in acting for women. Two presidents—Megawati Soekarnoputri and Park Geun-hye—are selected as cases of elite pathways at the national level, while two mayors—Tri Rismaharini and Kim Soo-young—for grassroots pathways at the local level. Drawing on the biographies and policies of these four women, the analysis develops an in-depth understanding of how women opposition leaders achieve leadership positions and how such pathways affect their substantive representation once in office. Findings are based on media reports, government documents, academic research papers, and personal interviews with the two mayors.

### 3. Elite Pathways: Megawati Soekarnoputri and Park Geun-hye

Both Indonesia and Korea have presidential systems and recently had their first women presidents. Coming from

political dynasties, Megawati and Park are illuminating cases of elite pathways: Megawati is the eldest daughter of Indonesia's first president Soekarno (1959–1965), while Park is the daughter of Korea's former dictator Park Chung-hee (1961–1979). Although they manifest dynastic politics in Southeast and Northeast Asia, respectively, both women began their political careers by representing opposition parties. Similar to other women leaders with family ties, both Megawati and Park emerged in crises, building legitimacy or exhibiting charisma as a “political savior who is destined to rescue the nation from its unhappy condition and who is able to impart a sense of hope” (Bell, 2014, p. 150). Megawati Soekarnoputri, who had emerged as an opposition leader confronting former dictator Soeharto, succeeded the presidency from the office of vice president to replace President Abdurrahman Wahid who was impeached by the parliament in 2001. As a candidate of the ruling party in the 2012 presidential election, Park emphasized her gender and family tie: a woman prepared to deal with the country's challenges, including increasing income disparities and persistent corruption in business and politics, with a motherly responsibility and sensitivity; and the daughter whose father achieved astonishing economic development for the country. However, they both also exhibited indifference or inability to address women's issues, illustrating that elite pathways “can be effective only to a point” (Lubina, 2020, p. 9).

### 3.1. Political Biographies of Megawati and Park

Born in 1947, Megawati Soekarnoputri's surname means “daughter of Soekarno.” She entered politics in 1987 after her father was given the title of Proclamation Hero. In 1996, she was elected to chair the Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia, hereafter PDI), one of the two opposition parties. In that year's summer when she was thrown out of the PDI chairmanship, Megawati emerged as the “undisputed opposition leader of Indonesia” (Torregrosa, 1998, p. 246). In the month-long resistance, her supporters—militants, human rights advocates, union organizers, intellectuals, farmers, and students—camped out on the streets around the party's headquarters in Jakarta. The military eventually cracked down on the protesters, which was followed by riots that left five people dead, more than a hundred injured, and 20 declared missing and Megawati was barred from running in the 1996 parliamentary elections. When President Suharto began his seventh five-year term in early 1998, Indonesia's economy collapsed amid the financial crisis and a long-suppressed discontent with his corrupt regime broke out onto the streets. Megawati joined other opposition leaders in demanding Suharto's resignation.

Reestablishing the PDI as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan, hereafter PDIP), Megawati created and controlled a formidable political machine that took her to

victory in the 1999 parliamentary elections (Mietzner, 2016, p. 358). However, she lost the presidential race against Abdurrahman Wahid in the indirect presidential election and instead became the vice president. In 2001, when Wahid was impeached, she became the country's first woman president and was hailed as a symbol of women's political advancement. But she soon turned out to be far less interested in women's issues even compared to her male predecessors (Blackburn, 2004, p. 94; Suryakusma, 2003). According to Reid (2014, p. 166), along with other women leaders of Southeast Asia, Megawati's election as president could be attributed to “a more aggressive male relative being hors de combat, but undoubtedly something also to a particular style of female charisma attractive to the region's voters.” In other words, Megawati's political rise was possible because of the country's deeply conservative and male-dominated political culture combined with her influence inherited from her father Soekarno.

Megawati's political capital—i.e., Soekarno and her preservation of Soekarnoism—seems crucial to our understanding of her political performance. According to Mietzner (2016, p. 359), Soekarnoism consists of three major principles: (a) that Indonesia should be multi-religious and thus not turn into an Islamic state; (b) that nationalism unifies all Indonesians; and (c) that the state protects the poor, or so-called “little people” (*wong cilik* in Javanese). Due to her status as the matriarch of the Soekarno dynasty, Megawati has been at the center of securing the dynasty's political significance and still plays a key role in the country's politics. When she stood as an opposition leader, she was viewed as “the only figure with the kind of charisma to move the masses” (Torregrosa, 1998, p. 250). However, she has also insisted that “hard and tough” politics is for men and she was doing politics not as a woman but as a Soekarno.

Born in 1952 as the eldest daughter of dictator Park Chung-hee, Park Geun-hye grew up at the Blue House after her father became the acting president in 1963. Following her mother's death in 1974, she took over official duties as first lady until her father's assassination in 1979. She entered politics during the 1997 presidential election by supporting Lee Hoi-chang, the ruling Grand National Party's (hereafter GNP) presidential candidate. Lee lost his presidential bid, while Park was elected as an MP in 1998. When the opposition GNP faced unfavorable electoral conditions in the 2004 general election, Park emerged in the party leadership, stimulating regional sentiment and nostalgia for Park Chung-hee. Galvanizing the conservative electorate, Park contributed to the GNP's unexpected electoral success of winning 121 seats, stunning the pollsters that had predicted 50–80 seats at best (S. Shin, 2019, p. 165).

After being elected as the GNP's substantive leader in July 2004, Park consolidated her image as the “election queen” by making a string of electoral victories. In the May 2006 local elections, she played a critical role in the GNP's sealing 12 of the 16 city mayorships and provincial

governorships. Unsurprisingly, she emerged as a strong candidate in the 2007 presidential primary but lost the nomination to Lee Myung-bak, who won the December presidential election. During the Lee presidency, Park led the opposition faction within the party and reinforced her popular image as “a principled, trustworthy politician” while the Lee government made a series of political missteps, failing to meet its electoral promises (S. Shin, 2019, p. 167). When the GNP was in crisis in late 2011, she used her position as the GNP interim leader to reorganize the party and changed its name to the Saenuri Party. In the April 2012 general elections, the Saenuri Party won a majority of 152 seats, which was widely attributed to Park’s election strategy. In the following 2012 presidential election, Park became the first Korean president to achieve an overall majority of the popular vote and the first woman president (S. Shin, 2019, p. 167). From the very beginning, however, Park became the subject of public and media scrutiny due to accusations of electoral fraud and poor responses to disasters like the 2014 Sewol Ferry incident. She retained a relatively high popularity among older generations until late 2016 when the “Choi Sun-sil Gate” political scandal turned the tide against her. In 2017, she became the first Korean president to be impeached by the parliament, which was later confirmed by the Constitutional Court.

Similar to Megawati, Park’s biggest political capital was her father. Although Park Chung-hee remains controversial, he is regarded among older generations as the leader who laid the foundation for the “Miracle on the Han River” that “transformed one of the poorest countries in the world at the end of the Korean War into an economy generating a GDP per capita comparable to that of some European countries” (Koen et al., 2021, p. 82). Park’s personal tragedy, losing both parents to assassination in 1974 and 1979, also catalyzed an empathy that

became important political capital for her electoral support (S. Shin, 2019, p. 165). However, once in office, her leadership style was “widely considered to be ‘imperial,’ ‘aloof’ and ‘out of touch’” (S. Shin, 2019, p. 173). Unlike Megawati who downplayed her gender, Park highlighted her gender by promoting herself as “the prepared female president” (Oh, 2014, p. 202).

### 3.2. Political Performance of Megawati and Park

Both Indonesia and Korea are presidential democracies with multi-party systems. In both countries, the president is both the head of the state and the government, holding dominant powers such as discretionary appointment powers, chair of cabinet meetings, emergency long-term or decree powers, central role in defense as the commander in chief, and central role in government formation (see Jalalzai, 2010, pp. 143, 147). However, even with these dominant powers, both women’s presidencies marked mixed, somewhat disappointing, records in addressing women’s interests. Studies have shown that elite pathway women have exhibited indifference or unwillingness to challenge the prevailing patriarchal gender ideology (Everett, 2014), which explains their disappointing record in improving women’s rights and status (Derichs et al., 2006; Richter, 1990). Similarly, both Megawati and Park were conservative leaders who expressed little concern about gender equality and women’s interests. This can be evidenced by a decline of women’s representation in the cabinet under the two women presidents, too: there was only one woman minister (the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family) during the Park administration while there were two (the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and the Ministry of Trade and Industry) during the Megawati administration. Still, both women presidents did make some “critical

**Table 1.** Political performance and substantive representation of women by Megawati and Park.

Policy areas	Megawati Soekarnoputri (2001–2004)	Park Geun-hye (2013–2017)
Gender equality	Enactment of Law No. 23 of 2004 regarding the elimination of domestic violence Enactment of Law No. 39 of 2004 regarding the Placement and Protection of Overseas Migrant Workers	The Framework Act on Gender Equality replacing the 1995 Framework Act on Women’s Development Partial amendment to the Act on the Prevention of Sexual Violence and Protection of Victims
Pro-poor	Enactment of Law No. 40 of 2004 regarding the National Social Security System	Basic Pension System for all seniors, 65 years or older (largely failed due to the unclear role-sharing relationship with the National Pension Service)
Children/Family	—	Free childcare for children under the age of five (failed to implement due to the failure of securing the budget)
No action	Gender quota (30%) of the parliamentary seats proposed by the Indonesian Women’s Coalition for Justice and Democracy	Increased recruitment of women managers in public office (a campaign promise but women’s proportion in senior positions actually decreased)

acts.” Table 1 provides an overview of the laws and policies decided or implemented during each president’s term, as well as those that were unsuccessful. Following Jalalzai’s (2016) model, the policies related to women’s interests are classified into four categories: gender equality, pro-poor, children/family, and no action.

From the beginning of her presidency, Megawati received criticism for taking no action on women’s issues, such as the plight of women migrant workers, violence against women, and women’s participation in politics. Many criticized her public rejection of affirmative action and gender quotas for the reason that they contradicted the democratic principle of equality. Comparably, her two male predecessors had made breakthroughs for Indonesian women: Interim President B. J. Habibie issued a presidential decree setting up the National Commission on Violence against Women and President Abdurrahman Wahid redefined the Women’s Ministry as the Ministry for the Empowerment of Women. Megawati rarely expressed any concern about women’s issues or engaged in any conversation with women’s organizations and activists (Suryakusma, 2003).

At the end of her tenure, however, perhaps in a desperate move to appeal to the electorate, Megawati legislated three critical laws, which civil society organizations had demanded for years. She ratified Law No. 23 of 2004 on the elimination of domestic violence on 22 September 2004 and enacted Law No. 39 of 2004 on the placement and protection of Indonesian migrant workers and Law No. 40 of 2004 on the National Social Security System on the last two days of her presidency (Trisnantoro, 2018, p. 148). The three laws provided important ways for addressing issues of domestic violence, migrant workers, and the social security system but they were not without limitations. For example, both activists and academics criticized Law No. 23 of 2004 for having no specific regulation regarding sexual violence against women and children or for not including more vulnerable victims of sexual violence, such as domestic workers (Chotib, et al., 2022; Komnas Perempuan, 2011). Concerning Law No. 39 of 2004, civil society members and organizations criticized the Megawati administration for failing to consult with them before enacting the law, which does not recognize migrant domestic workers and undocumented migrant workers, the majority of whom are women and much more vulnerable to ill-treatment as migrant workers are not eligible to receive the government’s protection (Setyawati, 2013, pp. 270, 273).

Park inherited both structural and cultural challenges to representing women’s interests as well as restrictive women’s policies initiated by her predecessors. One of the issues was the high rate of women’s unemployment as a result of a career break due to childbirth and childcare. The preceding administrations established the support system for career-interrupted women’s employment, including the expansion of spouse parental leave and the mandatory implementation of a claim scheme for family care leave, but with little effect. During the

campaign, Park had promised free childcare for children under the age of five but her administration failed to fulfill it because of conflicts with the provincial governments and education offices over financial issues (Cheon, 2017). The Park administration’s women’s employment policy that focused on the creation of part-time jobs was also criticized for its negative implications on widening the gender gap in the labor market and continuing gender roles in which women are exclusively responsible for childcare within the family (K. Shin, 2014). The 2015 legislation of the Framework Act on Gender Equality that replaced the 1995 Framework Act on Women’s Development was largely viewed to have marked the government’s shift from a gender perspective focused on addressing gender inequalities to a conservative perspective focused on expanding women’s participation in economic activities (K. Shin, 2016).

Policy outcomes of Megawati and Park demonstrate the potential and limitations of national women executives with family ties in addressing women’s interests. Hailed as the first woman president in each country, Megawati and Park could have taken advantage of their historic ascension to top executive positions. However, while the dominant nature of the presidency provided them with opportunities to initiate and implement critical policies to represent women’s interests, they also faced institutional (e.g., a lack of support from political parties, regardless of the parties’ ideology) and cultural obstacles (e.g., patriarchal and patrimonial political culture). Considering how elite pathways might have shaped their exercise of political power and the institutional and cultural obstacles they faced once in office, it is fair to say that both Megawati and Park made some meaningful achievements. Megawati’s enactment of the three critical laws regarding domestic violence, the protection of migrant workers, and the social security system should be viewed as an important step toward improving women’s rights. Similarly, Park’s campaign promises to support the policies and programs for women’s reemployment and childcare could have generated more positive results if her administration had secured financial resources. In fact, little prioritization of women’s issues is not limited to Megawati and Park. Most women presidents who symbolized the family path to power in Latin America were found to have made little or no contribution to furthering women’s issues (Jalalzai, 2016, p. 218). Representational effects of women presidents, whether from ruling or opposition parties, seem to depend not just on their personal political modalities or constituency pressure but also on the degrees of gender sensitivity of political institutions, including parties and bureaucracy.

#### **4. Grassroots Pathways: Tri Rismaharini and Kim Soo-young**

Women hold far fewer political offices than men in both countries. Yet, both countries have exhibited some

modest expansion and diversification of women's pathways to political power, partly because of the adoption and implementation of political decentralization (Indonesia in 2001 and Korea in 1995). In both countries, the strengthening of local government was considered an essential element of democratization, and women were expected to be among the primary beneficiaries of improved needs assessment and service delivery. In 2021, women's proportions in legislative offices increased to 18% and 19.4%, respectively, at the provincial level and 15.5% and 30.7%, at the district/municipal level. However, women executives are still scarce at the provincial level (only one in Indonesia and none in Korea) and at the district/municipal level (less than 5% in both countries).

Tri Rismaharini and Kim Soo-young exemplify how women opposition leaders of grassroots pathways exhibit different characteristics and outcomes of political engagement in addressing women's issues at the local level, compared to their counterparts from elite pathways at the national level. Local executives in both Indonesia and Korea are responsible for delivering a wide range of services for the development and well-being of the local community. Elected every five (in Indonesia) and four years (in Korea), mayors in both countries have powers to draft local regulations, issue mayoral decisions, propose and implement the municipal revenue and expenditures, and submit supplementary budget proposals (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2014; Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2017). From women's perspectives, what mayors, rather than the president, represent can be more vital to the delivery and improvement of services they have a direct stake in, like employment-generation schemes, public schools, health clinics, housing, and sanitation.

#### 4.1. Political Biographies of Risma and Kim

Born in 1961 as a third child to a family of seven headed by a civil servant father, Tri Rismaharini became the first woman mayor of Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city, in 2010. Trained as an architect and city planner (BA in architecture and MA in urban development), Risma spent 20 years in the civil service. As the head of the city's Sanitation and Parks Office, she earned a national and international reputation for her work of transforming the city from foul and congested into green and business-friendly (Harsaputra, 2014). Never active in party politics until 2010, she was nominated by the PDIP, then the largest opposition party in the parliament, as the mayoral candidate to pair with Mayor Bambang Dwi Hartono, who ran as a deputy mayoral candidate because he had already completed the maximum two terms. While taking advantage of the media attention to Risma's bureaucratic achievements, Bambang and other PDIP elites seemed unprepared for her stubborn personality and uncompromising working style. Once in office, Risma quickly became popular for her unusually

frank and unbending political style and her pro-poor programs. Alarmed by Risma's political rise, Surabaya's political and business elites immediately began using all kinds of tactics and political maneuverings to unsettle and even remove her from the political arena (Hakim, 2014, p. 147).

Risma survived such political manipulation and was even named as a potential candidate for the 2014 presidential elections. When we met in her mayoral office in June 2013, Risma reiterated the challenges she had faced and her responses to them:

I don't worry about political communication [with other elites]. I know that I have a good grip on regulations and the basics of society, and those who elected me. I have no political ambition. My mayoral position is given by Allah. I must respect the trust from the people and satisfying their needs is the most important. (Interview, June 12, 2013)

Her weak position in the PDIP's internal politics resurfaced when the party recommended Wisnu Sakti Buana, who had endorsed the move to impeach her in 2011, for the deputy mayoral position. In 2015, she was reelected with over 86% of the vote.

Born in 1964 to a family of five, as the eldest daughter of a small business owner father and housewife mother, Kim Soo-young began her political engagement as a student activist. In 1986, Kim was elected the President of the Student Council of Ewha Women's University. Kim entered formal politics by joining the campaign team for opposition candidate Kim Dae-jung in the 1992 presidential election. The election of Kim Dae-jung as the first opposition president in 1997 opened up a massive influx of left-leaning so-called "386 generation" of former student and labor activists into formal politics. In 1999, she participated in the establishment of the Democratic Alliance for Women's Political Empowerment (today's Korea Women's Political Solidarity), which advocated for gender quotas and provided women political power-seekers with training and support. In 2006, Kim became the first head of the Women's Hope Center for Employment Support in Siheung and Changwon. The center's success story provided a model for the 2008 Act on the Promotion of Economic Activities of Women with Career Interruption and by 2012, more than 110 centers operated to provide career-interrupted women with training and support for reemployment across the country (Kang et al., 2017, p. 92).

Kim first ran for the Yangcheon mayoral re-election in 2011 in a bid to replace her husband, also a former student activist who was elected as the Yangcheon mayor in 2010 but had to resign after being sentenced for electoral fraud. Unprepared and subject to the public suspicion of her intention, she failed in the election. In 2014, she beat a formidable candidate in the party primary for the Yangcheon mayoral candidacy, benefiting from the party's internal regulation that gives women 10% of

the votes as extra points. As a woman candidate, she took advantage of the Government Fund for Women’s Development, the legislation to which she contributed as the head of the women’s department of the Uri Party (Interview, June 30, 2022). She became the first woman mayor to represent an opposition party (New Politics Alliance for Democracy, today’s Democracy Party) in Seoul. She was re-elected with 61% of the votes in 2018 but lost her third bid in the 2022 election by a narrow margin.

#### 4.2. Political Performance of Risma and Kim

Like women presidents’, women mayors’ substantive representation seems to be affected by a combination of factors: from structural factors such as political parties and governance systems/procedures; situational factors such as the extent of political apprenticeship; to relational factors with bureaucrats, local assembly members, and the constituents. Expectations about a right balance between femininities (e.g., communicative and honest) and masculinities (e.g., decisive and authoritative) also seem to pose a challenge to women mayors. Both Risma and Kim adopted a “motherly” image and approach to politics and governance, which is reflected in their priority policy areas, such as gender equality, social welfare, and children/family (see Table 2).

Risma continued to invest in the city’s infrastructure, including public parks and established a home for homeless people where they can receive vocational training and support to start small businesses (Hakim, 2014). In 2011, Risma made public education free through secondary school allocating more than a third of the city’s budget to education (Jacques, 2015). In 2013, Risma received a Millennium Development Goals Award for

education and the healthcare of mother and child from the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono government (Hakim, 2014, p. 223). One of her most controversial decisions was her instruction to close prostitution areas, including Gang Dolly known as the largest red light district in Southeast Asia, and to establish rehabilitation and training centers for former prostitutes. The number of prostitutes decreased from 3,518 in 2008 to 2,117 in 2012, which was hailed by the Ministry of Social Affairs as a national model (Hakim, 2014, p. 94). Although this event may reflect Risma’s extraordinary courage and determination, it was also criticized by aid and healthcare workers as being ineffective in eliminating the sex trade and adversely driving prostitutes to more risks. Religious leaders—Surabaya being the home base of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s largest cultural Islamic organization—and moralists were the strongest proponents of Risma’s move. However, her critics argued that making prostitution illegal would force many sex workers to work in more dangerous and unregulated conditions (Pandaya, 2014). Still, Risma’s achievements were widely praised, and, in December 2020, President Joko Widodo appointed her as the Minister of Social Affairs.

Not only as a former opposition activist but also as one of the few women mayors, Kim employed both feminine and masculine leadership styles. As a self-proclaimed “Mother Mayor,” she focused on improving the city infrastructure, from public libraries to playgrounds and places for parents with small children, and on providing working parents with childcare support (Park, 2017). To understand residents’ daily needs, she held monthly off-site mayor’s office meetings for which she traveled around the district and met with residents. She also employed a masculine leadership style when she had to persuade reluctant bureaucrats

**Table 2.** Political performance and substantive representation of women by Risma and Kim.

Policy areas	Tri Rismaharini (2010–2020)	Kim Soo-young (2014–2022)
Gender equality	Women friendly city Economic Heroes ( <i>Pahlawan Ekonomi</i> : training programs for housewives from poor families)	Woman-friendly city selected by the Ministry of Women and Family Enactment of Ordinance on the Creation of Women-Friendly City Women leaders workshops
Social welfare	Social services for people with social welfare problems ( <i>Pelayanan Masalah Kesejahteraan Sosial</i> : PMKS) Health services for the poor	Foodbanks for the poor Various regular events for the poor seniors
Children/Family	Free public education for primary and secondary school Shelters for abandoned children and children with special needs Public libraries	Public libraries, including the new Yangcheon District Public Library Childcare facilities (e.g., playgrounds, Book Café, Mom Café, and childcare support centers) Emergency childcare service



or legislators while making big decisions regarding the district's development (Interview, June 30, 2022). In representing women's concerns, Kim's administration held yearly workshops for local women leaders (2014–2022) and provided career-interrupted women with opportunities for training and employment in various areas, from education to entertainment. In 2017, Kim also succeeded in getting Yangcheon selected as a women-friendly city, a national policy that encourages both women's and men's participation in local policy-making for women's development, care, and security in the city.

Both Risma and Kim began their political careers representing opposition parties out of strong commitments to represent the people. As an experienced and highly respected bureaucrat, Risma emerged as the Surabaya mayor with a good grasp of the problems that local communities faced. As a staunch activist, Kim assumed the Yangcheon mayoral position with a deep understanding of the everyday challenges of local society, from housing to childcare. Though somewhat different in leadership styles—Risma showed a tendency of taking a top-down approach while Kim appeared somewhat low-key—both women mayors used their executive leadership to represent their constituents' aspirations and women's interests. While mayoral powers have limitations in terms of resources and impact, and not without controversies, both women mayors initiated and implemented diverse policies to improve their cities to be more women-friendly.

## 5. Conclusion

By comparing national and local women opposition leaders in Indonesia and Korea whose political pathways seem distinct from each other—the former's rise to presidential positions attributed to family ties while the latter's to commitments to local communities—this article demonstrates the complexity of women opposition leaders' political pathways and performance. National women opposition leaders' pathways and performance were closely intertwined with family background, while their local counterparts pursued and exercised executive leadership to advance their political agendas, including women's issues. The article also shows that the political performance of women executives, including those who began their political careers by joining opposition parties, depends not only on why and how they pursue political power but also on the institutional and cultural obstacles that they face once in office. While a biographical study has limitations, this article suggests it can be a useful approach to the study of women opposition leaders when and where their small number deters any attempt to study them systematically. It seems so particularly when women opposition leaders assume executive leadership in the political systems in which executives can initiate and implement a wide range of government policies. That said, given the building scholarly consensus that governance is not just about political representation but

deeply related to the governance systems by which gendered power relations and practices are reproduced, taking institutional and cultural dimensions into the study of women opposition leaders should be the next research agenda. In doing so, political parties deserve special attention in terms of their roles (or lack thereof) in both nominating, training, and supporting women for executive office and integrating women's issues into the political agenda.

## Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the two anonymous referees and the editorial team for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article and the interviewees for their time and insights.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## References

- Bell, D. S. (2014). Review article: Political leadership. *Government and Opposition*, 49(1), 139–158.
- Blackburn, S. (2004). *Women and the state in modern Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Celis, K. (2010). Gendering representation. In G. Goetz & A. G. Mazur (Eds.), *Politics, gender, and concepts: Theory and methodology* (pp. 71–93). Cambridge University Press.
- Celis, K., Childs, S., Kantola, J., & Krook, M. L. (2008). Rethinking women's substantive representation. *Representation*, 44(2), 99–110.
- Cheon, H. (2017, February 8). Pak-kūn-hye chōng-pu 4nyōn, kyo-yuk-chōng-ch'aek-ūl p'yōng-ka-ha-ta [Four years of the Park Geun-hye government, evaluate its education policy]. *Jeonbuk Provincial Daily*. <https://www.domin.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=1142921>
- Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2009). Analysing women's substantive representation: From critical mass to critical actors. *Government and Opposition*, 44(2), 125–145.
- Choi, N. (2019). Women political pathways in Southeast Asia. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21(2), 224–248.
- Chotib, M., Safira, M. E., Multazam, L., & Maftukhin, M. (2022). Examining the long road to protection of women from sexual violence in the bill on the elimination of sexual violence. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 5(5), 347–356.
- Curtin, J. (2008). Women, political leadership and substantive representation: The case of New Zealand. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61(3), 490–504.
- Derichs, C., Fleschenberg, A., & Hüstebeck, M. (2006). Gendering moral capital: Morality as a political asset and strategy of top female politicians in Asia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 38(3), 245–270.

- Duerst-Lahti, G. (1997). Reconceiving theories of power: Consequences of masculinism in the executive branch. In M. E. Borrelli & J. M. Martin (Eds.), *The other elites: Women, politics, and power in the executive branch* (pp. 11–32). Lynne Rienner.
- Everett, J. (2014). Women in local government in India. In A. M. Goetz (Ed.), *Governing women: Women's political effectiveness in contexts of democratization and governance reform* (pp. 196–215). Routledge; United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- Fleschenberg, A. (2008). Asia's women politicians at the top: Roaring tigresses or tame kittens? In K. Iwanaga (Ed.), *Women's political participation and representation in Asia: Obstacles and challenges* (pp. 23–54). NIAS Press.
- Goetz, A. M. (2009). *Governing women: Women's Political effectiveness in contexts of democratization and governance reform*. Routledge.
- Hakim, A. (2014). *Tri Rismaharini*. Change Publisher.
- Harsaputra, I. (2014, February 15). Tri Rismaharini: Madame mayor iron fist, tender heart. *The Jakarta Post*. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/02/15/tri-rismaharini-madame-mayor-iron-fist-tender-heart.html>
- Jacques, H. (2015, January 15). How Surabaya mayor stands up for sex workers, students and rare animals. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/jan/15/mayor-surabaya-indonesia-tri-rismarahini>
- Jalalzai, F. (2010). Madam president: Gender, power, and the comparative presidency. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, 31(2), 132–165.
- Jalalzai, F. (2016). *Women presidents of Latin America: Beyond family ties?* Routledge.
- Kang, H. J., Jeong, H. I., & Ko, H. (2017). Policies and legislations for women in Korea from the 1990s to the present. In Y. Cho & G. N. McLean (Eds.), *Korean women in leadership* (pp. 81–98). Springer International Publishing.
- Koen, V., André, C., Beom, J., Purwin, A., & Kim, B. (2021). Better policies to prolong the miracle on the Han River. In *Korea and the OECD: 25 Years and beyond* (pp. 82–95). OECD.
- Komnas Perempuan. (2011). *Mengenai pelaksanaan konvensi penghapusan segala bentuk diskriminasi terhadap perempuan di Indonesia, 2007–2011* [Regarding the implementation of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in Indonesia, 2007–2011].
- Lubina, M. (2020). *A political biography of Aung San Suu Kyi: A hybrid politician*. Routledge.
- Madsen, S. (Ed.). (2015). *Women and leadership around the world*. Information Age Publishing.
- Mietzner, M. (2016). The Sukarno dynasty in Indonesia: Between institutionalization, ideological continuity and crises of succession. *South East Asia Research*, 24(3), 355–368.
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (2014). *Law No. 23 on the Local Government*. Government of Indonesia.
- Ministry of the Interior and Safety. (2017). *Local Autonomy Act (No. 14839)*. Government of Korea.
- Montecinos, V. (Ed.). (2017). *Women presidents and prime ministers in post-transition democracies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Novitasari, M., Roni, & Ardiansa, D. (2021). *Political leadership of eight women heads of region: A tug of war between relations and identity*. Cakra Wikara Indonesia.
- Oh, Y. (2014). Yŏ-sŏng-tae-t'ong-lyŏng si-tae yŏ-sŏng-chŏng-ch'aek-ŭi p'yŏng-ka-wa chŏn-mang [An analysis of women policies of the Park Geun-hye government]. *Minju Sahoeui Jeongcheg Yeongu*, 26, 201–230.
- Pandaya. (2014, June 22). View point: Is Risma only driving sex workers to the street? *The Jakarta Post*.
- Park, H. (2017). Bogji, iljali, geongang...eomeoniui ma-eum-eulo chaeng-gyeoyo: 'saenghwaljeongchi dal-in' Kim Young-soo Seoul Yangcheongucheongjang [Welfare, jobs, and health...take care of them with a mother's heart: Yangcheon mayor Kim Soo-young, the master of lifestyle politics]. *Shin Donga*, 692, 232–235.
- Rai, S. M. (2014). Political performance: A framework for analyzing democratic politics. *Political Studies*, 63(5), 1179–1197.
- Reid, A. (2014). Urban respectability and the maleness of (Southeast) Asian modernity. *Asian Review of World Histories*, 2(2), 147–167.
- Richter, L. K. (1990). Exploring theories of female leadership in South and Southeast Asia. *Pacific Affairs*, 63(4), 524–540.
- Setyawati, D. (2013). Assets or commodities? Comparing regulations of placement and protection of migrant workers in Indonesia and the Philippines. *ASEAS—Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6(2), 264–280.
- Shin, K. (2014). Si-kan-che no-tong-kwa sŏng-p'yŏng-tŭng: Pak-kŭn-hye chŏng-pu-ŭi si-kan-che il-chachi ch'ang-ch'ul chŏng-ch'aek-e tae-han pi-p'an-chŏk non-ŭi [Part-time work and gender equality: A critical discussion on the Park Geun-hye administration's part-time creation policy]. *Journal of Korean Women's Studies*, 30(1), 81–112.
- Shin, K. (2016). Yŏ-sŏng-chŏng-ch'aek-e-sŏ sŏng-p'yŏng-tŭng-chŏng-ch'aek-ŭ-lo? chen-tŏ-chŏng-ch'aek-ŭi o-hae-wa i-hae [From women's policies to gender equality policies? The misunderstanding and understanding of gender policies]. *Journal of Korean Women's Studies*, 36(4), 1–36.
- Shin, S. (2019). The rise and fall of Park Geun-hye: The perils of South Korea's weak party system. *The Pacific Review*, 33(1), 153–183.
- Skard, T. (2014). *Women of power: Half a century of female presidents and prime ministers worldwide*. Policy Press.
- Suryakusma, J. (2003, January 18). Indonesia: Megawati

hasn't helped her countrywomen. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/18/opinion/IHT-indonesia-megawati-hasnt-helped-her-countrywomen.html>

Tarrow, S. (2010). The strategy of paired comparison: Toward a theory of practice. *Comparative Political Studies*, 43(2), 230–259.

Torregrosa, L. L. (1998, April). Opposing force. *Vogue*, 246–250.

Trisnantoro, L. (2018). Healthcare system reform and gov-

ernance for sustainable development under Indonesia's health insurance (JKN) policy. In *Sustainable Development Goals in Southeast Asia and ASEAN* (pp. 143–159). Brill.

Vincent, L. (2010). A question of interest: Women as opposition. *Democratization*, 8(1), 69–84.

Wiltse, E., & Hager, L. (2021). *Women's paths to power: Female presidents and prime ministers, 1960–2020*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

#### About the Author



**Nanyung Choi** is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She has published in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *South East Asia Research*, *Indonesia*, and *Sojourn*.