

Transcript of Governance Uncovered episode 48: Breaking Barriers: Women's Political Participation and Activism in China, Iran, and Egypt.

Hello and welcome to Governance Uncovered - a podcast brought to you by the Governance and Local Development Institute, at the University of Gothenburg. This podcast is supported by the Swedish Research Council.

In this episode, we'll focus on gender activism and women's political participation in three different countries. First, we'll talk to Minglu Chen about the current state of women's representation in politics in China; where some progress has been made in recent years, but Minglu now fears that the country is taking a step back.

Actually, I fear that China is currently taking a big step back. This issue has been discussed a lot, end of last year, because the newly formed Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party is now, for the first time in 20 years, a male only Policy Bureau, which has caused a lot of attention and discussion.

Then, we'll hear Shirin Saeidi and Nermin Allam on how gender activism takes place in Iran and Egypt, how it has evolved during the past decade, and what progress has been made.

I think what's significant about women's activism in Iran right now is that women have, since the September 2022 protests, have become major players in national and international politics.

One way to think and to assess the gains of women over the past decade following the 2011 Egyptian raising, is to look at the changes in formal politics, in institutions and in the movement.

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Our first guest in today's episode is Minglu Chen. She is a senior lecturer in government and international relations, and a member of the China Center at the University of Sydney. Minglu has extensively written on women's representation in China, and we are excited to have her share her insights with us.

Minglu begins by highlighting the current state of women's political participation in China and dispels some common stereotypes. She later talks about the power dynamics within the Chinese Communist Party and the types of portfolios that women are often assigned. In addition, Minglu and Ellen discuss the impact of quotas at the local level versus the national level, and the role of the People's Political Consultative Conference in promoting women's rights.

My name is Minglu Chen. I am a senior lecturer of the discipline of government and international relations. Also, I'm a member of the China Center here at the University of Sydney.

Great. Thank you for joining me. So you've written a lot about women's representation in China and I'd like to ask you to start just by giving us a brief background or overview of the status of women in China.

I think women in politics, we start to see some of them in politics, but I don't think women's representation in politics, in China in general is very good. Actually, I fear that China is currently taking a big step back. This issue has been discussed a lot, end of last year, because the newly formed Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party is now, for the first time in 20 years, a male only Policy Bureau, which has caused a lot of attention and discussion. Just a few days ago, the National Congress of China elected the new State Council, right, so this is the highest level of the Chinese government. The leadership is of 10 members, one premier, four deputy premiers and five state councillors. So out of this 10 people leadership, there is only one female member. She occupies the lowest position as the state councillor, but that said, I think at the local level we start to see a constant number of women appointed, small number of women, appointed to leadership positions. So this has been a trend which has been I think fairly consistent.

And in fact, if I remember correctly, there's actually by design or by legislation that it needs to be increased every year. Is that correct? And can you give us a sense of about what percentage of the people in these positions are women?

This is an interesting question because actually according to the Chinese party state, its leadership is composed of four formal institutions. So the Chinese comes party that's number one, then the government are headed by the State Council, then the Congress, the legislature, and also institution called the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which is like an advisory body to the government of all levels. So currently I would say there is only one, one of these four institutions has got a quota system, which is the congress. So the Congress quota system was established in the year 2008. So before then, I think since 1988, there has been a practice which requires every Congress to have a higher percentage of female members than the past Congress. It was not until the 11th Congress, which was formed in 2008, actually first time stated there should be a percentage of female members of no less than 22%. I don't really know how and why this particular number was chosen, but that is the quota system we have here. Then outside the Congress, for the three other institutions, I don't think there is any quota system existing at the national level. But at the local level, sub national levels in the provinces, in prefectures, in counties, so on and so forth. I think that currently exist a small quota, which is every leadership both for the party, for the government, for the people's political consultative conference should have at least one female member.

Excellent, thank you. And you focus in your article on the women in the Congress and really are trying to sort of understand what types of women get elected or get appointed to these congresses. Can you tell us how people see these women and what the sort of the stereotype of them is?

Actually have to correct you here. Sorry it's women in the party committee and in the government.

Sorry about that, yes.

That's OK. The Congress is a little bit of a weird existence, a lot of people dismiss it as well as the people's Political Consultative conference as rubber stamps, as they have no real functions in Chinese politics. But I don't really agree with this field, but I feel like women's governing power really exists in their positions in the party committees as well as the government. There is a stereotype like people currently understand within China, that for a woman to be able to be promoted to a leadership position, she has to combine different identities together and few different marginalized identities. So not only should she be female, of course, but she would be of one of the ethnic minority groups, she would be a Communist Party outsider as well as ideally, she's also an intellectual, which is I think an important social group that the Chinese Communist party often always has put an eye on just to call up to their potential distant voices. So this is what is commonly believed and these different identities put together in Chinese, sounds something like "wu zhi shao nü", which translates literally into innocent young girls. If you conduct a search on baidu.com, which is the biggest search engine in China, you have a whole page of "wu zhi shao nü" referring to female political leaders. It's very unfortunate because this understanding refers to these women's appointment into important leadership positions as not of real significance. It's just the Chinese Communist parties, tokenistic gesture and also that means once they are appointed, they actually don't have any real power to exercise.

It's actually it reminds me of how a lot of times people think about affirmative action or appointments in places like the US are hiring right where the idea is, OK, if you hire, you know, a woman who's also a minority who's also a number of other margins, you know, first generation and etcetera, then that helps you to kind of check multiple boxes. And so you're basically pointing to a very similar understanding, and you're right dismissal then of why did this woman get appointed, or why is she there? It's not because she is good and qualified, it's because she can check three or four boxes on a form or on a quota. So you take a very careful look at the women who are actually holding these positions and what do you find?

I actually find this stereotype in most cases doesn't really apply, but I'm not saying that this practice of tokenism does not exist in Chinese politics, but I feel there's a lot more nuance behind this. So we often see a woman who probably has one other identity of marginalized group, but only one out of all the provincial leaders who are female, I have only witnessed one case which is a so-called innocent young girl. So she is a woman of an ethnic minority group, she is not a member of the dominant Chinese Communist Party and also she had a very interesting track record as a senior academic.

How do we understand the power that these women actually have, within the party for instance, how do we understand what they can do when they're influenced?

I'm glad you're asking me this question now because actually I have started to do some new research on this. My published paper wouldn't be able to answer this very question, so I am

currently looking at how responsibilities are kind of divided within provincial governments in China, among male and female provincial leaders. So my findings indicate that often women are assigned with several less so powerful portfolios. Sometimes they get assigned to a so-called feminine portfolio. So which could be women's affairs, children's affairs, civil affairs, healthcare, so and so forth, but in general still I think they are in charge as a group of a lot of important functions of at least China's highest level of local governments. So for example, since the year 2000, there has been a trend of female provincial leaders being allocated portfolio of foreign affairs as well as ethnic affairs. This allocation needs to be examined more. I still am struggling with how to interpret this. But I feel it's just uhm, it would be too simplistic to say they're not in charge of any real power.

And it might be very interesting to consider the places or the areas in which they have more or less power right, though, as you mentioned earlier, even in other bodies, we see that there's some places where at the local level they've decided to have quotas, while at the national level there isn't, right. So that's a, it's an interesting question as to what drives different areas or different contexts to allow women to be more powerful and have a greater say. It's really fascinating work and and you have a sense, I mean you're giving us a one sense of where your own research is going, right, to sort of move from who's in place to understanding when and why they have power. What are the other questions that you think this raises or the other lessons, for example for people interested in policy, for instance, that we should take away from your work?

That could be probably again the next stage of my work. So you did ask me earlier who would be kind of stakeholders who would try actively to promote women's rights, women's interests. So I did give this a little bit of thought. My other passion outside women in politics is the institution of people's political consultative Conference, this so-called rubber stamp institution in Chinese politics. So I look at what this organization does, so it has a lot of Members, right? They get together every year for a few days, but they also organize activities for these members to participate throughout the whole year when this uhm, conference does not meet. Through this annual conference, and also frequent activities, members put in proposals to suggest for new policies to be adopted to existing policies to be adjusted. I just had a look at that, there's someone has put together a list of, an incomplete list of proposals submitted through the national level of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, I think last week or the week before, they just met for a whole week, so I had a look at this list. I fear that is a incomplete list which includes about 120 - 130 proposals. There is information of the member of the PPCC who put forward this proposal as well. About 10% of these proposals come from female members of the PPCC, but we have to set this into contacts in general at the national level I think this current 14th CPPCC has only got 20... 22% female members sitting on board. This incomplete list shows 10% of these proposals come from women, so I had to look at, so what do these female members care about? There's only two proposals that touches upon the issue of women's rights and all the rest are about other things. A lot of how to for the government to manage how to best manage economic issues, how to facilitate the development of certain economic sectors. So it's I I feel it's a not a surprising finding but I it's obviously quite disappointing.

Now it's an important one, right? And it fits with some work on other regions where we also find that women don't necessarily put forth women's issues. I mean, it's also interesting because you're pointing out to that if 22% of the members are women, but only 10% of the proposals being put

forth are women. Then it does suggest also that women are less engaged, at least in, in initiating proposals, than men are. Because we would have expected about 22% of them to be coming from women as well. But you're right, it's an important question, both asking what does it mean if women are in positions, and also how that might change over time, that there's some evidence for example, Marwa Shalaby is done working in the Middle East, that suggests that over time, women start to have, in legislatures, more important portfolios and have more teeth to their position than they do early on, so there's some interesting questions about that as well that that we could look at.

Yeah, absolutely. And the fact that there is a growing number of women in charge of foreign affairs in China's local government really challenges this conventional understanding of women are put in charge of portfolios that has more to do with the so-called private sphere.

Yeah, you've opened a lot of questions and I want to again thank you for taking time both to share your work with us and also to think through what are the many questions still to be answered. Really appreciate it. It's great work. Thank you.

My pleasure.

Now, we'll hear from Dr. Shirin Saeidi, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas and director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies, and Dr. Nermin Allam, an assistant professor of political science at Rutgers University-Newark.

Together with GLD's Ghadeer Hussein, Shirin and Nermin will discuss gender activism in Egypt and Iran. They will share their research insights and experiences in these two countries.

They'll talk about how the September 2022 protests in Iran and the Egypt 2011 uprisings have affected how women engage in activism and are recognized by society. Dr. Shirin and Dr. Nermin will also discuss how progress and success can be defined in gender activism in these different political and social contexts.

So hello and welcome to our podcast. First of all, I would like to ask you to kindly introduce yourselves to our audience, Dr. Shirin.

Thank you for having me. I'm an assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas and the director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies.

And Dr. Nermin.

Hello everyone, I am also an assistant professor of political science at Rutgers University-Newark.

Thank you so much and good to have you in the podcast. My first question is what are the gains of women in Iran and Egypt in recent years, and how do you see gender activism in those countries at the moment?

I will go first. I think what's significant about women's activism in Iran right now is that women have, since the September 2022 protests, have become major players in national and international politics. And so, while there's been a lot of literature written about women's role in state formation and resistance in Post 1979 Iran, I think at this point it's undeniable for the Iranian state and the international system. The second most important gain I believe, particularly in the last six months or so, has been a transformation in gender relations. So we are witnessing recognition about the importance of a woman's physical autonomy from older generations, from Iranian men, people who 6-7 months ago didn't necessarily speak vocally about these issues are coming out, including some marginalized data leads. So these are the two major gains I see for women in Iran.

Thank you so much, Dr. Shirin and Dr. Nermin, I would like to ask you, how do you see gender activism in Egypt at the moment, and how do you see the gains, if any?

Excellent question, I'll answer by sharing a story. I love sharing stories from the field. I think it does center women voices and accounts. So in 2020 I carried out my first round of interviews in Egypt, and I was then studying the experiences of women in the 2011 Egyptian rise. And I vividly remember one of my interviewees and my quite positive impression of her. Before the revolution, she had a speller and well-paid position in the corporate world, and following her participation, she decided to quit her job and to start an organization to combat sexual violence against kids. Her experience during contention, she explained, made her believe in her capacity to instant change. And made her value herself as well as the right of human beings for dignity and respect, regardless of which. Why am I sharing this story? Because one way to think and to assess the gains of women over the past decade following the 2011 Egyptian raising, is to look at the changes in formal politics, in institutions and in the movement. And when you look there, when you look at the institutions, when you look at the policy changes, you will see more women in the Parliament, you see more women in government positions. Which is theoretically of course a good thing, but also in the autocratic context of Egypt, it could mean many other things. These reforms are significant, but they can also often end up serving the regime. So this is one way to evaluate it, to locate, change and reform over the past decade or so. There is another way that I think are important to evaluate and to think about the gains and changes over the past few years following the uprising. And that is is to look how the uprising created the generation of women with distinctive gender and feminist consciousness. So during the 2011 Egyptian uprising, we saw a generation of activists of protesters who experienced a very different political and cultural setting. At the most basic level, their experience has challenged and continue to challenge societies conformity to taken for granted, concepts taken for granted, authorities and life courses, and opened them up for debate. So for example, one can change, and I will conclude with this, one can change will be observed around the issue of bodily rights. How women activism have talked around the issue of bodily rights during the uprising, how it contributed

to putting sexual violence and morality discourses in conversation in recent years. Challenging, scrutinizing the gendered moral accountability structure in the society, the structure that pins the shame on the victim or the survivor. And as a result, for the past decade, you see an increasing number of survivors coming forward, sharing their stories and an increasing number of initiatives also emerging to compound and expose gender comments by bringing in these examples of no way, downplaying the state of melancholia. You could, could say in the activist community in Egypt, due to the regime heavy crackdown and and censorship. I am aware of the dangers of falling back into an escapist optimism, but also aware of the dangers of falling back, of falling on the paralyzing nostalgia. And I'm also cognizant of the importance of highlighting these small nods of hope, because without them, we really risk losing the ability to capture whenever it does occur, the possibilities for change.

Perfect. Thank you, Dr. Nermin. And since today we're talking about two different contexts, Egypt and Iran, I also have another question related to progress in activism. How can we define progress, what counts as success and progress in gender activism in those two countries with two different political and social contexts? So, Doctor Shirin, what's your take on that?

Yes, thank you. Another important question and it flows so well with Professor Allam's explanation in the first question about women's gains in Egypt. I agree we have to, it's a fine line of highlighting and recognizing the small gains and the hopes and aspirations of people in Iran and in Egypt without overlooking the difficulties that they're facing, the different kinds of state depression that they're encountering. With that in mind, I typically, as a feminist scholar, I like to think about progress in a rather, you know, somewhat simple way. I find a lot of analysis that tries to measure things, but for me, anything that women in Iran protesters view as progress and are proud of, I view that as progress as well. And I and I reflect on that and think about it critically. I want to follow up on an important point of of telling stories that Professor Allam highlighted by also sharing this story. So in the last, especially in the last few weeks, there have been videos coming from inside Iran, of young women dancing in the home. There was a video of a young woman dancing in front of Evin prison, which is a notoriously known prison group. There's a lot of, of protesters and activists that are there currently and what I thought you know, there was a lot of debate around this idea of, you know, is this good for the movement? Is it bad? What does this mean? But what I found to be significant and I heard through conversation with my friends and contacts in in Tehran, was that we're witnessing women posting these videos themselves, whereas in the last several years they were often sending these videos anonymously to journalists or contacts abroad and having them posted. So the fact that women are posting these videos themselves without, you know, we had women that are well known, who who were even arrested in the last six months but then released, who are then following up with these videos as well and posting videos and images of themselves dancing, so I think this is significant because as Professor Allam highlighted, women's sense of self, their development of self-confidence, the strengthening of subjectivity and identity - these are very important gains that are fundamental to progressive transformations in in women's rights.

Great. And Dr. Nermin, you mentioned gender consciousness. So how can, in light of this concept, how can we define progress in Egypt, especially after 2011?

Yes, of course. I mean in in Egypt and in Iran, while acknowledged, of course, that there are differences in between both cases, but both cases, I think they help us see how the target of things action and acquisition, how it can be much broader than how it is typically understood. It helps us to see how renegotiated the censorship rights, and how in renegotiating the social contract with how to asking and demanding respect for their bodily rights and only in the public and the private spheres we've seen recently professor Saeidi highlighted, how in so during women's action and activism, how it opened up for negotiating the social contract between the state and citizens broadly beyond women groups. The point that I'm making is that women's contestation, whether it is in the public or in the private spheres, women's push for expanding and for securing their citizenship rights, the different forms that they take under constructed regimes like Egypt or Iran, these conversations, it forced the state to renegotiate its social contract with women and consequently, with its citizens as well. These tensions and challenges in the regime are a reminder that maybe, resistance can and will build over time, that it can generate a growing potential for future mobilization, that push for development and change. Maybe not in this slide, but maybe in future cycles. Change and reform are, they are the sum of the constant and consistent, and even sometimes inconsistent efforts to chip away a little change. And activism has and and endurance quality, and that was frightens the genes. Because, it keeps upon us the promise that we reform are yet are not yet conceded, but are yet to happen.

So we understand from your answer that you're hopeful for a better future in the near future then?

I am always betting on the on the people and how their, they they never cease to surprise me. So of course I'm hopeful. Again, I'm not downplaying the current state of disappointment among many activists. And then activism has an error response, and the reforms and changes are cumulative. They are not the outcome of single movement or one protest or one marching, but it is the outcome of consistent and even sometimes inconsistent efforts to chip away at the regime. And some of these efforts can be used properly. Some of them can be going down to the streets. But at the end, change and reform do happen and do take place. We just hope that it happened in our lifetime.

And Dr Shirin, how do you see the future of the uprising in Iran?

I am also, I'm optimistic, but I'm also cautious of making broad generalizations and predictions which we have seen some of that in recent months happening. I think what is for certain, is that Iranian women within the country have made it clear that things have changed and they, and this is not necessarily new. I talked about this in my book that since 1979, the state has constantly been forced to catch to to women and the changing cultural norms in society, which one could argue exists everywhere in some capacity. But I think this time, like Professor Allam highlighted in her discussion, what essentially began as a protest against police violence and the death of a young woman, has transformed and evolved into really questioning the legitimacy and the structure of rule and gone. And where that is going to take us, I think I again agree with my dear colleague that you know, I also am, I'm really committed to human creativity, and so I will be watching closely, but I think that the politics of Iran is in the process of transitioning into something new.

Yes, we hope that there are a better future and positive changes happening in our lifetime. Thank you so much for your insights and thank you for being our guest today at the podcast and, thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

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