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Introduction:

Women political leaders—Expanding our knowledge with new eyes and new purpose

In 2017, a bright bunch of Sri Lankan school-aged children were interviewed by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems as part of its ‘SheLeads’ programme. The children were asked what they wanted to be when they were older, to which they responded, teachers, lawyers, doctors, a judge, a banker, an engineer. They were then asked, ‘What is a politician’, to which came replies such as, ‘Someone who comes and asks for our votes’, ‘People I have seen on TV’ and, thankfully, ‘Someone who serves the people’. Bright-eyed and enthusiastic, the boys and girls were easily able to answer the next question, ‘Do you know the names of any politicians?’ Their responses began: ‘The President of our country’, ‘Maithripala Sirisena’, ‘Ranil Wickremasinghe’, ‘Mahinda Rajapaksa’, ‘Obama’, ‘Donald Trump’. *The list went on and surprisingly on, as the children rattled off the myriad names of male politicians.*

Then the conversation turned: ‘Can you name any **woman** politician in Sri Lanka?’ Pin-drop silence. Awkward smiles were accompanied by, ‘I don’t know any’, ‘I haven’t heard of any’ and ‘I don’t know much about these things’. These blank faces coming from a country that bears the honour of having had the world’s first elected female Prime Minister and the rare privilege of having elected two female heads of state in its short history as an independent country.

In writing *The Woman President*, I did not deliberately set out to bring visibility to women leaders. Yet so much of the attention paid to women in executive office has focused on their absence, rather than their presence. The dominance of men in politics has shaped not only the practice of politics but also, in turn, the narrative. This male ‘supremacy’ has resulted in entrenched expectations of masculine leadership styles and a derisive discourse that often equates female leadership in this space with emotionality, weakness, and, at its most extreme, hysteria (Jamieson 1995; Wright and Holland 2014, 456). These narratives are sustained by the

reality that few women worldwide have risen to the rank of national leader—24 in executive office as of January 2022, based on my count (Figure 1).

As a first-ever comparative study of women’s leadership, the law and their legacy for women’s lives, this book offers an alternative viewpoint—what happens when a woman occupies the nation’s highest office. In pursuit of a fair evaluation of their performance, *The Woman President* provides a new set of tools to facilitate a methodologically sound assessment of the gender-responsiveness of their tenures. Yet, even before the evaluation stage, we must consider the expectations that pervade the halls of the woman executive. It is often assumed that She will lead differently, She will lead better and She will deliver better outcomes.

[INSERT FIGURE 1.1]

Figure 1.1: Countries of the world with female Presidents and Prime Ministers (as of January 2022) (Source: Created with mapchart.net with Author’s data)

First, women leaders and the decisions they make are assumed to deliver more for society. In the words of Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State (1997–2001), ‘women in government can be counted on to raise issues that others overlook, to support ideas that others oppose, and to seek an end to abuses that others accept’ (Albright 2016). The notion of this ‘game-changing’ difference that ‘unleashing’ the power of women can make in society has reverberated through the halls of the United Nations (Moon 2015; UN News 2005). It was also an assumption carved into one of the earliest and arguably most renowned blueprints for women’s rights, the 1995 United Nations Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: ‘Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspective[s] at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved’ (United Nations 1995, para. 181). There was little acknowledgement of the irony that this document was produced by an organization, the United Nations, which has not had a single female Secretary-General in its history—only nine men.

The assumption that women make better leaders has persisted over time. When the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world at the tail-end of 2019, analysts were quick to draw links between government responses and female leadership. Countries with women leaders—that is, *women* making decisions for their people—were faring better than those with male leaders (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2021). Associations were drawn between gender, leadership and outcomes, despite the fact that the correlations were difficult to prove, it was far too early to draw conclusions and the data were, at times, disputed (Aldrich and Lotito 2020).

Second, beyond the benefits for societies at large, a very particular expectation correlates women's leadership with women's lives. Women leaders—it is hoped—will do more for fellow women. For many—scholars, analysts and voters—the presence of a female leader signifies a particular turning point, renewed hope for the embedding of hard-fought and hard-won women's rights norms into domestic law, policy and government decision-making, including the achievement of gender-responsive budgets. These 'unearthly' expectations placed on the shoulders of women presidents and prime ministers have been one of the core motivations for writing this book. For some, more sceptical of politics, their expectations of women leaders may be tempered. For others, the mere presence of a woman leader on the national stage creates euphoria. The utterance of 'She' or 'Madam' means far more than the simple shift in gender pronoun may suggest.

While perhaps not equally deeply felt at all levels, this heightened expectation that women leaders will make a difference for their fellow women is evident from the local, grassroots level through to national activists, scholars and policy-makers, right up to the global arena. Too often, however, hasty and superficial assessments of a woman's time in executive office lead to the blanket conclusion that 'She' did little for society or for her fellow women. In contrast, in this book I seek to revisit this question of outcomes, with an evidenced-based, quantitative and qualitative approach to understanding the impact of the woman leader through a deep-dive into the legislative footprint of four leaders from South and Southeast Asia.

1.1 Themes and threads for the comparative theory-building table

We can begin by asking a simple question: *Do women leaders facilitate the passage of women-friendly outcomes?* I aim to answer this question by exploring the legislative footprint of four women leaders in three different political systems in Asia.

There are significant reasons why the field of the law has been chosen as the lens of analysis. Leaders in presidential systems wield evident power over the law, while the law itself has incredible norm-setting power. We will encounter both these 'powers' in the first part of the book. It is worth noting that this lens is a hitherto entirely unutilized one, with this study offering the first examination of legislative output and presidential interaction with that legislation in comparative terms and with a focus on women.

The Woman President offers the scholarship a tested set of common standards against which to assess the 'legal legacies' of women leaders, a phrase coined for the purpose of this study. Chapter 2 offers a three-pronged framework for this multi-faceted concept. Put succinctly, to understand a leader's legislative footprint, we will evaluate the contribution of

the woman leader to positive legislative outcomes for fellow women when assessed against international standards, but also the law-related decisions made by the female president that ultimately undermined potential advances in women's well-being.

The Woman President uses the vantage point of four women presidents: Maria Corazon Sumulong Cojuangco-Aquino (hereafter, Corazon Aquino), the Philippines' first female President (1986–1992); the Philippines' second female leader, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010); Indonesia's first and only female President, Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–2004); and Sri Lanka's Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Sri Lanka's eleventh Prime Minister, its fifth President (1994–2005) and daughter of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first female elected head of government. Interviews with key informants from the three countries act as a major source of data. An innovative index—the Gender Legislative Index—which originated from a unique collaboration between law and data science, forms the basis of an evaluation of the gender-responsiveness of nearly 100 laws. The words of women leaders themselves—both from a personal interview with the author and through their speeches—bring depth to the assessments and conclusions drawn.

The challenges that exist in undertaking research on women executives—such as small data sets and the complex realities of politics, including party loyalty and where one identifies on the spectrum from liberal to conservative—have left a gap in knowledge that needs to be filled. This gap has often been resolved through interviews and profiles rather than an aggregated evaluation of the experiences of women leaders (Bauer and Tremblay 2011, 2). This singular approach is understandable, given that a comparative study of women in executive office in Asia has been described as being '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). The potential and limitations of such a comparative study are grappled with in the following chapter (see section **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Yet the observed patterns and trends make such a comparative study highly relevant. Given the lapse of time since the leadership of these women, a comparative study serves as an anchor for the extraction of generally applicable *themes*, which can then be placed on the comparative theory-building table. In order to achieve such comparative possibilities, a methodologically sound approach to the scholarship on women executives and their impact is needed. Further analysis of key themes, lessons and tensions is required to guide both scholarly analysis and the pragmatic promotion of future women presidents and prime ministers.

In seeking to illustrate potential linkages between women's leadership and women's rights, I have identified four existing assumptions that, to varying degrees, inform the global discourse concerning women presidents and prime ministers. First, I consider the assumption that an internally driven feminist agenda is what matters. As none of the four Presidents under study identified as feminists, nor articulated an explicit women's rights agenda, there was little reason to believe that their impact would necessarily be beneficial for women. Furthermore, their rise to power as members of families who wielded notable political and social power countered the presumption that they would willingly break the mould and *necessarily* leave a positive legal legacy on the lives of fellow women.

A second assumption acknowledges that a female president operates not in a vacuum but within a wider political context. With other competing priorities that burdened their leaderships—during somewhat fragile periods, often including times of democratic transition or domestic conflict—women and women's rights would inevitably be deprioritised. A third and related assumption stresses the socio-political and economic environment in which women lead. Three countries were heavily marked by patriarchal and male-centric structures, making it unlikely that the four leaders could promote women's interests in the political setting, even if they wanted to.

A fourth and final assumption challenges these previous inferences. It suggests that, regardless of the context, having women present at the executive level is necessarily good for women. This potential benefit extends beyond the question of parity, mainly because women essentially lead differently (Robinson and Lipman-Blumen 2003)—a phenomenon worth interrogating further.

By virtue of the very limited numbers of female leaders enjoying executive power, these assumptions have been largely untested. Rarely have lines been drawn between gender-equality policies and women's leadership at this level. Where scholars have credited, for example, Chile's Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010 and 2014–2018) or Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of Liberia and the first elected female Head of State in Africa (2006–2018), for their gender-equality agendas, their analysis has proceeded with caution. Policy agendas that favoured women were often designed for a particular purpose—often political—and as such, were framed a particular way (Adams 2008; Lieberfeld 2011; Ríos Tobar 2007; Thomas and Adams 2010). Indeed, Johnson-Sirleaf capitalised on her gender, opening with the campaign slogan, 'All the men have failed Liberia—Let's try a woman' (Thomas and Adams 2010, 125).

This book, *The Woman President*, seeks to go beyond this observation of gender and leadership as merely capitalizing on this status as a woman. The analysis conducted in its pages

is centred around an initial assessment of how women's interests were represented in the Woman President's agenda. Yet, defining these 'women's interests' is a further challenge, one set out in more detail in Chapter 2. Among the rare studies that have attempted to document the policy impact of women in executive office,¹ the vast majority focus on a very narrow subset of women's concerns. Researchers have analysed Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, former First Lady (2003–2007), President (2007–2015) and then Vice-President (2019-present) of Argentina for her staunch opposition to legalization of abortion (Morgan 2015). Malawi's President Joyce Banda (2012–2014) has been studied for her electoral campaigning on social protection for women, children and the poor (Hamer and Seekings 2017). Both Banda and Johnson-Sirleaf have been compared for their successes and limitations in addressing the severe number of maternal deaths in Malawi and Liberia respectively (Lalthapersad-Pillay 2019); elsewhere Johnson-Sirleaf has been the subject of a wider study of her imprint on women's political participation and economic entitlements, and legislation on gender-based violence (Kodila-Tedika and Asongu 2017, 88). This book embraces those oft-considered women's rights concerns while bringing within its scope a much wider range of laws and policies that directly impact on women's lives: democracy, peace, economic development, an end to corruption and workplace-related rights.

None of the four women studied in this book emerged from national women's movements. Terms like 'blind' or 'oblivious' to women's rights, or phrases such as 'not their cup of tea' (Interview 31), were readily shared during fieldwork when asked about their women's rights agendas. This general assumption of an insensitivity towards women's rights (both unintentional and, at times, deliberate) among the four leaders debatably made this task of documenting their gendered footprint a harder one. At the same time, their images as being devoid of a feminist agenda potentially offered a more neutral starting point for assessing their legacies on the lives of fellow women. It is important to note too, that had I chosen to assess women leaders who were more forthright in their campaigns for women's rights, we would be left with a possibly biased set of conclusions concerning the difference the Woman President makes.

Despite a general assessment of gender blindness, a brief snapshot of the four presidential scenarios leaves a sense that much-awaited laws saw their passage when these four women

¹ In contrast to the literature examining the policy impact of women executives, a very significant body of literature considers the role of women legislators in promoting and pushing through legislation on women's rights and gender equality, particularly in relation to reproductive and sexual health, gender-based violence, family law and child care (see Cowper-Coles 2020, 59–62 for a detailed literature review).

were in executive office. Moreover, it is worth recognising the pace of their enactment, in some instances, relatively rapid if we compare them to other women-friendly laws passed when women were not commanding the political direction.

Moreover, the four presidents proved to be highly strategic. In other words, outcomes should not be considered (entirely) accidental. In all four contexts, the changes achieved and legal and policy directions identified demonstrate a clear desire to leave a footprint on a selected set of political agendas. Yet while acknowledging that women leaders are first and foremost politicians, the image that emerged many years ago of the ‘roaring tigress’² needs reconsidering. Women leaders—in ways that prove in this study to be gender-specific—are caged by the political context in which they lead. The Woman President has to jump through multiple hoops—at times flaming. The question set out in this book is, can they leap through the flaming hoops while still leaving a positive image in the minds of the cheering crowds, particularly the women for whom their leadership is assumed to be particularly beneficial?

While assumptions pertaining to women’s leadership need revisiting, we are faced with an absence of systematic and methodologically nuanced tools to pursue such research on what difference women executives make (see Jalalzai 2013, 7, 12–15 for more on this gap). This leaves particularly fertile ground for research if we want to go beyond the ‘add women and stir’ approach where male-centred leadership is the starting point of the conversation (Beckwith 2005, 128). In response, *The Woman President* provides a new understanding of leadership in three selected post-colonial, post-autocratic realities within the Asia region.

1.2 What to expect from this book?

Before setting up the frameworks, key concepts and approaches applied to this study, the scene needs to be set for readers. In Chapter 2, we begin with the big picture—what does women’s leadership as heads of state and government look like globally—before narrowing the conversation to ‘Asia’.³ From here, the question to ask is, what difference does this ‘Asian’ leadership make on the law and how has the legislative output of the four women leaders shaped the lives of their fellow women? Foremost in this analysis is the question, ‘For which woman does the law work or not work in advancing their rights and interests?’

² In 2008, political scientist Andrea Fleschenberg raised the question: are women executives roaring tigresses or tamed kittens? (Fleschenberg 2008). Here I pivot from the evident power of women in executive office to ask, how was that power used and for what cause?

³ The term ‘Asia’ is used loosely to capture both South and Southeast Asia. Moreover, both these sub-regional categorisations are used with caution. Greater attention is given to the regional diversity and important distinctions between these three nations in Section **Error! Reference source not found.**

With this initial picture in mind, a further part of the stage remains missing. A question that has occupied much of the political sciences scholarship over the past half century is the quantification of executive power—across presidential, semi-presidential and prime ministerial systems. Chapter 3 makes an important intervention in the scholarship by setting out a general taxonomy that delineates presidential influence over legislation. It defines key aspects of executive power *as they are linked to law and legislation*. This taxonomy is subsequently used in this study to understand the impact of the decisions of the four women presidents and the shape of domestic law.

Despite decades-old and long-lasting assumptions that women leaders deliver more—for women, for society, for their countries—the scholarly traditions interested in this subject lack a method for measuring the legislative footprint of leaders on women’s lives. Chapter 4 offers readers such a methodology. A combination of key informant interviews—including with one of the four former women presidents—and quantitative analysis of legislation enacted in the three countries, drives these findings. The Gender Legislative Index, a world-first legal index that uses human evaluators and machine learning to determine the gender responsiveness of individual laws, is also introduced to readers in Chapter 4. Here I explain why the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was the chosen benchmark against which the laws were assessed. This decision to ‘quantify’ CEDAW is contextualised with a brief assessment of the degree to which CEDAW is ‘owned’ by national women’s movements and organizations.

Turning to the rise of the Woman President, the female leader does not rise alone. Much of the scholarship in this field has paid attention to the overt nature in which women leaders in South and Southeast Asia are linked to some form of male lineage—fathers and husbands who have been central figures in the national political landscape. Yet the *use* of gender by the woman leader in many more nuanced ways calls for a re-analysis of the commonly written assumptions about gender and leadership. Revisiting the question of gender also opens the possibility for a potentially more applicable consideration of if and how women leaders ‘capitalize’ on their gender as mentioned above. Part II, ‘For whom and what the tiger roars: The Woman Leaders and their legal legacies’, begins by offering, in Chapter 5, this new foundation for understanding the instrumentalization of gender, for and by the woman leader. This chapter discusses how sex, gendered norms and expectations affected the four presidencies, acting both as assets and barriers. It provides the background context before I turn to a substantive evaluation of the legal legacies.

Studies in the political science have been slowly carving a body of evidence that the presence of (more) women in legislative bodies leads to positive investments in women-centred outcomes. In this case, the research also suggests the inclusion of the interests of other marginalized and excluded groups—children, the poor, the disabled and elderly—when women legislate (Berkman and O'Connor 1993; Courtemanche and Green 2017; Mansbridge 2005, 625; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003). One could imagine that the Woman President, too, operates within this logical framework.

Two of the chapters that follow—Chapters 5 and 6—navigate through a number of core women's rights concerns: women's rights to freedom from violence, women's reproductive health, gender equality quotas and social protection at work. Through the lens of these issues, Chapter 6, 'Leading for women: Bringing women's issues to the legislative table', offers the positive footprint—how the Woman President brought legislative change that advanced the interests of women—before I turn to the extent to which the Woman President impeded progressive reforms in Chapter 7, 'Roadblocks for women: The woman leader, conservative politics and regression on women's rights'. Yet these two chapters illustrate the tendency to understand women's issues in a limited way. When women are subjects of law, they are often sketched as the victims of violations of bodily integrity (Otto 2019, 533; Vijayarasa 2013, 368). A more encompassing and holistic approach to 'women's interests' requires a wider-set of concerns that are—incorrectly—frequently seen as gender-neutral issues (Warren 2002, 23).

In response, Chapter 8, 'Outside the box: Crediting women leaders for benefiting women in less visible ways', helps readers to rethink what is good for women. Across the four tenures, it examines political initiatives that affected women but are rarely considered from a gendered standpoint. For each president, one particular issue is discussed in depth: President Aquino and the setting of democratic foundations; President Megawati and labour law reform; President Macapagal Arroyo's anti-poverty agenda; and President Kumaratunga's pursuit of peace.

Part III of this book, 'Beyond the woman, beyond the nation: Conceptualizing women's leadership' acknowledges that certain political and non-political apparatuses may enable better outcomes for women. This section of the book explores those mechanisms by charting its way across a number of cross-cutting themes that emerge from Part II. Women leaders, we know, rise with the support of women constituents. Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.**, 'The President and the people: Women's movements and their role in fusing gender into the legal system,' considers the willingness of the Woman President to lend an ear to the advocacy and organizing of local women's organizations. The chapter offers evidence for how female leaders act differently in their relationships with formal and informal women's organizations.

What emerges is a sense of renewed hope when women lead and, in turn, resource mobilization that acts to catalyse the passage of women-friendly laws, alongside the employment of some old strategies from the toolboxes of women's rights advocates.

Particularly because female executives are so limited in number, they become highly visible on the international scene. Chapter **Error! Reference source not found.**, 'Women leaders in the international landscape: Bastions for gender equality?' takes the Women President out of her national landscape to the international policy-making arena. It explores both foreign policy and engagement in the global networks uniquely established for women executives. We are left with a sense of the potentially greater scope for women leaders to vocalize a concern for women's rights issues in international spaces, suggesting that there may be two sides to the gendered agenda of the women leader.

The conclusion returns to the global state of play. It ponders the relevance of the trends identified in these four presidencies for women's leadership globally. In doing so, the final chapter of the book offers a scaffolding for what it means to lead with women in mind, providing readers a vision for a gender-responsive leadership and a sense of what the woman leader, in particular, might bring to the table.

1.3 Proceeding with caution

The words of Sirimavo Bandaranaike—as both the world's first elected female executive (1960–1965, 1970–1977 and 1994–2000) and the mother of President Kumaratunga—provide a fitting way to conclude this introduction. At the time Sirimavo Bandaranaike was sworn in as prime minister, Sri Lankan civil servant, historian and district judge Sir Paul Deraniyagala remarked on the role that she had played when her husband (Solomon 'Solla' Bandaranaike) was still in power: 'In Solla's time Sirima presided over nothing fiercer than the kitchen fire' (de Alwis 2002, 31). Bandaranaike herself framed the role of Sri Lankan women in these terms:

I feel most strongly the home is a woman's foremost place of work and influence and looking after her children and husband duties of highest importance for her to perform. But women also have their vital role in civic life, they owe a duty to their country, a duty which cannot, must not be shirked. (de Alwis 2002, 31)

Bandaranaike's remarks explain criticisms sustained in Sri Lanka until today by one former civil servant: 'Mrs B', as she was then known, was 'only focused on coaching women to be righteous women and a good housewife' (Interview 48). Given the length and historical moment of her leadership, Sirimavo Bandaranaike challenged deeply ingrained assumptions about women occupying executive office, yet she was staunchly censured for her stance on

women's rights and for fuelling, rather than calming, ethnic tensions domestically (Interview 47).

My purpose in *The Woman President* is not to hide the realities behind women's leadership. Nor is it to blindly place a positive spin on the impact women have as presidents. Rather, in offering a book that is dedicated to exploring the legal legacies of the Woman President, my goal is twofold: first, to re-assess these oft-examined leaderships using a fair set of benchmarks—global and comparable in nature and systematically applied to all; and, second, to expand our concept of what is beneficial for women as a distinct group, and for women as members of society, bringing to light progress and barriers beyond a very traditional set of 'women's issues'.

This study proceeds cautiously. With the passage of time and blurring of memories—and yet also the vested interests of some of the women leaders in this study in current politics—it is important to take care in assigning credit for change. Care has been taken in attributing to the four women presidents what is rightly theirs, while at other times acknowledging the actors around them who helped bring about change.

Nuance is also required in avoiding essentializing the decisions taken by these women leaders as intrinsic to them being women. After all, in the words of one Sri Lankan Muslim activist interviewed for this study, whether a leader will deliver change for women has to do with more than just their biological sex or gender: 'the choice of leaders, their capacity and their leadership, depends on many qualities which are more human than women or men' (Interview 38). Yet the glaring difference in the number of men who have made it to executive office when compared to women calls for an evidence-based conversation about women leaders. This book, therefore, seeks to remind us of our progress but also to re-examine women's executive leadership in a way that may help to better understand why so few women have risen to national office, and what constraints exist on the type of executive leadership that might bring about a true transformation in the representation of women.