



# Partial gender quotas: The disparity in women's representation in Taiwan's legislature and cabinet<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the disparity between women's representation in Taiwan's presidential cabinet and its legislature. Under Taiwan's first female president, the legislative elections of 2020 resulted in a legislature of over 40 % female, while the proportion of female cabinet ministers remained consistently low. The paper uses document and text analysis to propose a conceptual framework of 'partial gender quotas' to explore this disparity, offering three possible explanations. First, the institutional design of gender quotas for female legislators promotes gender equality in parliamentary representation, while the cabinet is more directly shaped by party politics with less civil oversight. Second, the Executive Yuan's Gender Equality Committee has not realised feminist scholars' expectations to generate a more significant impact on Taiwan's political landscape. Third, Taiwan's female political leadership has shown reluctance to frame themselves as role models for women and girls.

## 1. Introduction

Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are an essential component of the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. The global proportion of women in ministerial-level positions in 2010 was 16.2 %, increasing to 23.3 % in 2024, according to the latest statistics (World Bank, n.d.a; UN, 2024). Similarly, women's seats in national parliaments rose from 19.0 % in 2010 to 27.4 % in 2024 (IPU, 2010, 2024). Even though these statistics have shown an upward trend, women are still underrepresented at all levels of decision-making processes worldwide. Regarding cabinet appointments, women ministers were typically assigned to policy areas, such as gender equality and women's affairs, family and children's affairs, social inclusion and development, social protection and security, and Indigenous and minority affairs (UNW, 2024).

Though not included in the UN calculations, Taiwan is widely praised for its democratic performance and institutions (EIU, 2024; Fell, 2018; Huntington, 1993) and is generally considered a global leader in gender equality in many domains (Chang, 2024). However, while the election of Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) to the presidency was a significant

milestone for gender equality in Taiwan, and her administration was praised for promoting same-sex marriage and LGBTQI rights (Blanchard, 2024; Ho, 2019), she has also come under criticism from feminist scholars and activists for her administration's low representation rates of female cabinet ministers compared to Taiwan's previously democratically elected administrations (Chen & Huang, 2023, p.45; Lee & Park, 2018, p.173).

At the time of Tsai's inauguration in 2016, over 38 % of Taiwan's national legislators were women, rising to above 40 % in the 2020 legislative elections. In marked contrast, the proportion of female cabinet ministers fell below 7 %. In 2016, the global percentage of female cabinet ministers stood at 18.4 %, which was higher than the proportion of women in Tsai's cabinet (World Bank, n.d.a; IPU, 2016).

We propose 'partial gender quotas' as a conceptual framework to critically assess this significant disparity between the proportion of Taiwan's female cabinet ministers and legislators during Tsai's two presidential terms from May 2016 to May 2024.<sup>1</sup> The proposed framework conceptually synthesises the feminist perspective on gender quotas (i.e. Fellegi et al., 2023; Huang, 2015, 2016, 2022; Mendiratta, 2023) with the idea of 'politics of presence' (i.e. Khoban, 2023; Phillips,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper mainly studies political participation of cisgender women.

2003<sup>2</sup>). Document and text analysis provides three possible explanations for the disparity. First, Taiwan's legislature (formally the "Legislative Yuan") has implemented gender quotas to bolster female representation, but such quotas did not apply to Tsai administration cabinet appointments. Second, a 'Gender Equality Committee' under the Executive Yuan, which is charged with promoting female representation across government departments and agencies, has yet to effectively address the problem of low female representation in the cabinet. Third, President Tsai and her female cabinet members rarely portrayed themselves as female political leaders or role models for women and girls in public.

To navigate the path toward gender equality in East Asia by challenging norms and facing backlash, as scoped by the Special Issue, this paper explores recent trends for women's political participation in Taiwan. The research findings highlight both context-specific and common obstacles faced by (potential) women political leaders in Taiwan and elsewhere in East Asia. This paper also proposes possible solutions to the problem of female representation in administrative cabinets.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. We first review the existing literature on women's representation in cabinets and legislatures. We then introduce the conceptual framework of 'partial gender quotas'. After discussing the processes of data collection and analysis, the first analytical section delineates the proportions of female cabinet ministers and female legislators between May 2016 and May 2024 in Taiwan. We then examine the lack of discussion on the issue of low female representation in the cabinet within the general meetings of the 'Gender Equality Committee of the Executive Yuan'. Three explanations for the disparity are proposed with a discussion of their conceptual implications. Finally, we conclude by discussing the empirical and theoretical implications of studying female political participation in Taiwan, as well as reflecting on the research limitations.

## 2. Women's representation in cabinets and legislatures

The existing literature on women's representations in government cabinets and legislative bodies largely focuses on countries in the Americas, Europe and Africa (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.1; Lee & Park, 2018, p.162; Liu, 2018, p.256). Reports on East Asia argue that women's access to ministerial power has generally increased since the third wave of democratisation, but women remain underrepresented in the cabinets of national governments in Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and the Philippines (Lee & Park, 2018, p. 162; Statista, 2024; World Bank, n.d. b).

It is argued that corruption, regime type (democracies versus autocracies), and women's presence in parliaments can shape women's representation in cabinets. Stockemer and Sundström (2017) find that corruption tends to hinder women's inclusion in cabinets within democracies, primarily because corrupt male elites tend to appoint male ministers who are close to them and can help carry out secretive tasks. It is also documented that women's presence in cabinets is relatively low in authoritarian regimes mainly because dictators often exclude women from their inner decision-making circles (Barnes and O'Brien, 2025, p.9.5). Whether women's increased presence in parliaments helps increase the proportion of women in cabinet posts remains inconclusive (e.g. Arriola & Johnson, 2014; Barnes and O'Brien, 2025; Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Lee & Park, 2018). On the one hand, some studies show that higher proportion of female legislators can lead to higher female representation in cabinets, as increasing the number of women legislators reshapes the 'institutional culture' and creates 'demand for more women in cabinets' (Barnes and O'Brien, 2025, p.9.5; Krook & O'Brien, 2012, p.844).

<sup>2</sup> This paper draws on the online version of 'The Politics of Presence'. The online version was made available in 2003, and its print version was published in 1998.

In their empirical study on Malawi, Wahman et al. (2021) note that the appointment of a female legislator to a cabinet post has a powerful symbolic effect on other serving female legislators. Building on the definition proposed by Bauer (2016, p.224) as well as Franceschet et al. (2012), Wahman et al. (2021, p.360) define 'symbolic representation' as 'altering gendered ideals about the role of women and men in politics, raising awareness of what women can do as political actors and legitimising them as political actors, or encouraging women to become involved themselves in politics as voters, activists, candidates, and leaders.' This 'role-model effect' is particularly significant among women who share similar political career tracks. That is, women consciously or unconsciously look up to more successful female political elites who manage to challenge existing gender norms and break through the glass ceiling (ibid., pp.360–362).

As noted by Krook and O'Brien (2012, p.853), the presence of more women political elites in legislative or executive branches can explain women's cabinet appointments in the majority of 117 countries across different regions, and women's representation may be promoted by gender quotas in the future. In contrast, according to Lee and Park (2018), those women who do serve in cabinets in South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines are also more likely to be appointed as cabinet ministers due to their professional expertise rather than political experience and only have limited access to cabinet positions through political career tracks such as serving as elected legislators or mayors. This finding is consistent with studies on democracies in other regions, suggesting that female cabinet members are more likely to be appointed for their professional backgrounds rather than through political experience accumulated through the posts of elected legislators or mayors (e.g. Arriola & Johnson, 2014; Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2015). Reviewing 206 cabinets in 15 advanced parliamentary and semi-presidential countries since 1980, O'Brien et al. (2015, p. 712) reported that 'rather than letting down the ladder and bringing women into their cabinets, female leaders in advanced parliamentary democracies sometimes shut the door behind them.' However, they also found that 'cabinets with female prime ministers or coalition party leaders... are no more likely to appoint women to high-prestige posts than their male-dominated counterparts (ibid., p.712).'

Literature on women's symbolic and substantive representation highlights the limitations of focusing solely on descriptive gains. Liu (2018), for example, finds that an increased proportion of women in East and Southeast Asian parliaments does not necessarily lead to greater political engagement among ordinary women. Her analysis suggests that more women in office do not automatically trigger higher rates of political participation, such as voting, campaigning, or protesting, among women in the general population. Liu (ibid.) also indicates that scrutinising how tokenism and hereditary politics may undermine the credibility of representative governance is crucial. We argue that, in the contexts whereby traditional gender norms have yet to be transformed by the increasing number of female legislators (i.e. Asia), all-male cabinets or overwhelmingly male cabinets risk rendering women's voices obsolete, premised on the lack of institutional mechanisms to protect women's representation. Thus, gender quotas remain vital not only to ensure women's access to political office but also to protect against the indifference or backlash of non-feminist male and female political elites who fail to advance gender equality (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.5; Huang, 2015, p.217, 2016, p.332; Krook & O'Brien, 2012, p.853; Yang, 2014, p.158).

Krook and O'Brien (2012) argue that women's cabinet appointments are influenced strongly by the presence of female elites and political strategies rather than by public attitudes or slow-moving institutional reforms. This insight is supported by Barnes and Taylor-Robinson's (2018) cross-national study, which shows that female cabinet ministers often emerge in contexts where formal rules and party practices are designed to promote inclusion. The symbolic power of women in executive roles usually depends on their visibility and the institutional environment that supports or undermines their influence (Alexander and Jalazai, 2020). Namely, whether the women appointed are granted

real power and opportunities to advocate gender-related reforms determines how symbolic gains legitimise or obscure persistent inequalities (ibid). This reinforces the need to institutionalise mechanisms, such as cabinet-level quotas and gender-mainstreaming practices beyond the legislature. While the presence of women alone does not guarantee feminist leadership, promoting women through political structures can improve both descriptive and substantive representation.

Scholars have conducted ample studies on female political participation in general, and gender and parliament in particular, in Taiwan (Huang, 2015, 2016, 2022, 2024a; Yang, 2001, 2014). These studies tease out the historical context of gender quotas and demonstrate that a large proportion of quota women in Taiwan's local elections had better qualifications in terms of education, social participation, and political experience compared to the men they unseated (Huang, 2015, 2016; Yang, 2014). The recent scholarly works mainly concern the substantive representation of women and limitations thereof, gender mainstreaming, and the parliament (Huang, 2022, 2024a; Shim, 2021). It is argued that although some MPs could represent women substantively by sponsoring bills concerning women's interests, the cabinet's lack of commitment to gender equality in the semi-presidential regime characterised by the power difference between parliament and cabinet could limit the substantive representation of women implemented by the gender-friendly MPs (Huang, 2022; Shim, 2021). It is indicated that the parliament doesn't fully practise gender mainstreaming because dominant political parties in Taiwan haven't entirely implemented relevant policies; nevertheless, women's representation is still far better than that in the cabinet (Huang, 2024a).

These studies have elucidated the effects of gender quotas, the current practices of gender mainstreaming and substantive representation of women, and the limits thereof. However, the existing works have yet to address the impact of the lack of female role models among female political leaders and non-elites, and they have yet to examine male leaders' influences. Echoing other scholars' concern regarding the low proportion of women in the cabinet (Awakening Foundation, 2020; Huang, 2022, p.86; Lee, 2021, pp.2079–2080; Liu, 2018, p. 264), our present study hopes to look into the gender disparity between the cabinet and the legislature.

Overall, the existing literature accounts for women's pathways to cabinet posts in East Asian countries and the effects of gender quotas, as well as substantive representation of women in Taiwan. Nevertheless, the political and cultural factors underpinning the gender disparity between the cabinet and legislature in Taiwan remain underexplored. This research aims to fill this research gap, where the analysis of the role-model effect for women is not limited to studying the impact among female political elites but rather encompasses the ways in which female political leaders could inspire non-elites to enter the political arena.

### 3. Conceptual framework: partial gender quota

#### 3.1. Conceptualising 'partial gender quotas'

Broadly, this research sheds light on the persistent hurdles to women's political participation and access to power in liberal democracies. Grounded on empirical studies in different cultural contexts, feminist scholars have asserted that both formal procedures and informal rules play significant roles in shaping women's participation and decision-making capabilities in the political realm, including in institutions such as political parties and administrative bodies (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.5). Formal rules include gender quotas, legal frameworks, electoral systems, policies, potential reforms, and so on (ibid., p.5). Informal rules include cultural norms, unwritten codes of conduct, public opinion, party dynamics, gender stereotypes, elite discourses, informal networks, and so on (ibid., p.5). As mentioned above, a lack of 'role models' and 'mentorship opportunities' could also obstruct women's political aspirations (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.5; Wahman et al.,

2021, p.362).

Gender quotas have proven effective in promoting women's descriptive representation, but complementary measures are vital for achieving substantive representation (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.5; Huang, 2015, p.217, 2016, p.332; Yang, 2014, p.158). These complementary measures include work-life balance provisions, gender-responsive budgeting, economic empowerment, and gender-mainstreaming practices (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.5; Huang, 2015, p.216, 2016, p.343; Yang, 2014, p.133).

Furthermore, gender quotas will likely facilitate 'positive trickle-down effects', meaning female representation in organisational leadership could trickle down to the lower ranks through network, mentoring, and advocacy mechanisms (Mendiratta, 2023). First, female leaders will likely recruit more highly qualified women for managerial positions. Second, since mentoring relationships tend to be among people of the same gender, female leaders are also more likely to mentor other younger and junior women to prepare them to access positions of power. Third, female leaders could act as 'agents of change' who advocate for the equal rights of other women and strive to secure women's voices in decision-making procedures (Stahl et al., 2023).

This research posits the conceptual framework of 'partial gender quotas' to explain the gender disparity between the cabinet and legislature in Taiwan. This framework acknowledges that gender quotas must be implemented alongside context-specific complementary measures because some aspects of the transformative agendas of feminist campaigns are likely to be compromised when translated into policies (Jalil, 2023). As Kabeer (1999, p.436) points out, such translation could involve 'a process in which some of the original political edge of feminism has been lost'. In addition, the considerations of public opinion and party dynamics may also impede the adoption of progressive gender equality policies (Fellegi et al., 2023, p.4). Gender quotas, in the short term, may guarantee the descriptive representation of women through the reserved seat system; nevertheless, the substantive (i.e. feminist) representation might only be achieved in the long run (Joshi & Timothy, 2019; Phillips, 2003; Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000).

#### 3.2. Historicising partial gender quotas in Taiwan

##### 3.2.1. Developments of gender quotas from 1946 onwards

The implementation of gender quotas appears to be contradictory to a merit-based mechanism in the elections. However, gender quotas create a competitive mechanism with more fairness for capable female candidates to fare better within their predicament of less access to resources and power in the midst of patriarchy (Huang, 2024a, p. 206).

Conflicting outcomes arise as the number of women's reserved seats increases in parliamentary and local councils, the number of women relying on these seats for election decreases (ibid). Previous studies explain that the primary importance of gender quotas lies in encouraging women to participate in local elections, and once women enter the electoral competition, their competitiveness often enable them to win elections without relying on gender quotas (Batto et al., 2014; Batto, 2014; Batto, 2019; Huang, 2016).

Huang (2016) further demonstrated that most female candidates elected by gender quotas possess comparable or even better qualifications than those men they unseated. The case study of France also reveals that women representatives elected by gender quotas perform on par with their peers (Murray, 2010). Therefore, the effects of gender quotas support the merit-based mechanism rather than oppose it.

Grounded on the Constitution passed in 1946, women's reserved seats were implemented in local elections in Taiwan, and the quotas were set at five to 10 %, depending on the election type and the scale of the district (Huang, 2016, p. 327; Yang, 2014, p.147). By the early 1980s, 10 % of the reserved seats no longer served as a helpful institutional instrument to improve women's political representation; rather, it became an obstacle because both the ruling party and the opposition chose not to nominate more women than the allocated number of

reserved seats (Huang, 2016, p.327; Yang, 2014, p.147). Along with democratisation since 1987, Taiwan passed seven amendments to the Constitution between 1991 and 2005, during which feminist scholars and activists demanded an increase in women's reserved seats to at least 25 %. The proportion of 25 % is seen as an important threshold by feminist scholars and activists to help female candidates secure the position as 'the critical mass' in legislative and executive bodies (Huang, 2016, pp.329–330).

Peng Wan-Ru was an enthusiastic advocate of the one-fourth gender quota. She and her feminist fellows started to 'push the DPP to adopt a one-fourth gender quota in its nomination rule' (Huang, 2016, p.330). After tireless efforts by Peng and her fellows, the DPP adopted such a gender quota in 1996. Two years later, the ruling party (i.e. KMT) passed 'the Local Government Act', which allowed the government to adopt a similar one-fourth rule in stipulating women's reserved seats. This one-fourth served seat rule was enacted from the 2002 local elections onwards. According to Huang (ibid., p.330), the one-fourth reserved seat rule stipulated in the Local Government Act slightly differed from that adopted by the DPP. The DPP nomination rule requires that 25 % of seats should be secured for a minority gender, not just for women, meaning that if the party nominated three women in a district, the fourth nominated person must be a man. However, the Local Government Act stipulated that the reserved seats are for women, suggesting that a district can have all women nominees.

Furthermore, the 2005 electoral system reform was crucial for improving female representation in the Legislative Yuan. With the total number of seats in the Legislative Yuan decreasing from 225 to 113, the electoral system was changed into a parallel system, consisting of single-member districts (73 seats), party lists (34 seats), and Indigenous peoples' districts (6 seats) (Huang, 2016, p.331; Yang, 2014, 146). Crucially, at least 50 % of the party list presented by each political party must be women (Huang, 2016, p.331; Yang, 2014, p. 147).

3.2.2. Political-cultural factors in partial gender quotas

Feminist activists pushed for the adoption of gender quotas in candidate nominations within the DPP and the KMT, as well as the KMT-promoted 'Local Governmental Act'. Both parties also implemented internal party quotas, requiring at least one-third of the members of their top-level committees to be women (Batto, Juang and Lin, 2014; Huang, 2024b). However, while a significant step toward inclusion, neither party has fully implemented this one-third rule. This suggests that male members within the DPP and the KMT are not active advocates of gender equality. Instead, both parties remain influenced by male members who have not shifted their belief in male superiority. In other words, the political and cultural factors obstructing the full adoption of gender quotas across all constitutional organs include party and factional politics, inevitably shaped by powerful chauvinistic men.

Some influential DPP funders were Hokkien patriarchs who upheld male lineages and patriarchal cultural norms. Their support for the DPP was arguably as much about rooting for democracy as it was about overturning the KMT-ruled government, which was dominated by 'people from out of the province' (*wài shēng rén*, 外省人) who migrated to Taiwan in 1949 (Wang, 1998, p.257). Analysing television ads during the 1995 and 1996 presidential and legislative campaigns, Wang (1998) argues that both parties subjugated women and their sexuality under their respective nation-building projects. In the Legislative Yuan, some male legislators offered only superficial support for gender equality bills at best. In some instances, male legislators intentionally took bathroom breaks during votes on such bills (Yang, 2001, p.148). Additionally, during the early 1990s, both KMT and DPP male legislators opposed loosening border control for female care migrants, invoking nationalistic claims to justify their patriarchal positions (Cheng, 2020, pp.459–460).

Thus, the conceptual framework of 'partial gender quotas' aims to analyse three issue domains relating to the practices of gender quotas in Taiwan and propose three possible explanations for the gender disparity. First, we will assess the effects of gender quotas adopted in the

nomination of candidates for legislators on female representation in the legislature. Second, we will account for the limited role of the cross-ministerial gender equality agency in increasing the proportion of women ministers. Third, we will further delineate the possible political and cultural factors (i.e., informal rules) underpinning the persistence of male dominance in the female president's cabinet.

4. Data and method

This study involved a systematic compilation of all meeting notes of the Gender Equality Committee of the Executive Yuan, speeches, statements, and interviews by President Tsai and her female cabinet ministers, coupled with archived lists of cabinet ministers of the Executive Yuan and the database of the Central Election Committee. A thematic analysis was applied to the meeting notes, speeches, statements and interviews, using different NVivo coding techniques to identify emergent themes relating to gender identity, role model effect, advocacy of gender equality, and so on. The proportions of female cabinet ministers and female legislators were calculated based on the compiled archived documents of the Executive Yuan and the database of the Central Election Committee.

4.1. Proportions of female cabinet ministers and female legislators in Taiwan (May 2016–May 2024)

4.1.1. Proportion of female cabinet ministers

As shown in Table 1, on May 20, 2016, the initial cabinet of President Tsai's first term had 6 female ministers (out of 41 in total), accounting for 14.60 % of the total cabinet. By September 8, 2017, the cabinet had expanded from 41 to 45 members, but the number of women remained at 6, thereby lowering representation to 13.33 %. March 2018 witnessed a cabinet restructuring, reducing the total cabinet to 44 members, with 5 women, further decreasing representation to 11.36 %. At the beginning of Tsai's second term in May 2020, the total cabinet size was reduced to 43 members, including only 3 women (6.98 %). The downsizing of the Transitional Justice Commission in July 2022 saw the total cabinet decrease to 41 members, of which three were female, thus raising representation to 7.32 %. On May 20, 2024, the new cabinet formed during incoming President Lai Ching-te's (賴清德) first term showed a noteworthy turnaround, with 10 women in a cabinet of 40 members, significantly raising representation to 25 %.

That said, based on the available data, it remains inconclusive whether President Lai's decision to promote more women in the cabinet was intended to reduce the gender disparity, comply with the party's one-third nomination rule to uphold the DPP's gender-friendly image, or was a spillover effect from the Legislative Yuan's gender quotas, similar

Table 1  
Presidential cabinet gender ratio (May 2016 to May 2024).

| Date           | Total Members | Number of Women | Proportion of Women | Notes                                                                                  |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| May 2016       | 41            | 6               | 14.60 %             | Tsai's first term                                                                      |
| September 2017 | 45            | 6               | 13.33 %             | Cabinet reshuffle                                                                      |
| March 2018     | 44            | 5               | 11.36 %             | Chen Ming-tong replaced Chang Hsiao-Yueh as the Chair of the Mainland Affairs Council. |
| January 2019   | 44            | 5               | 11.36 %             | Cabinet reshuffle                                                                      |
| May 2020       | 43            | 3               | 6.98 %              | Tsai's second term                                                                     |
| July 2022      | 41            | 3               | 7.32 %              | Transitional Justice Commission downsized                                              |
| May 2024       | 40            | 10              | 25.00 %             | Lai's first term                                                                       |

Source: Author compiled from Directorate-General Personnel Administration (2024), Executive Yuan (n.d).



to what [Shin \(2014\)](#) observed in South Korea regarding the positive impact of quotas across electoral systems. Furthermore, attributing the increase in women's proportion of cabinet members to the long-term effects of gender quotas is also debatable, as highlighted by [Joshi and Timothy's \(2019\)](#) observations in Vietnam. This is because gender quotas may undo the distorted gender gap in elections, while they have not been institutionalised in the appointment procedures of political appointees in Taiwan. Additionally, [Stockemer \(2017\)](#), in a study of 194 countries from 1965 to 2014, identified a correlation between women's representation in the legislature and the cabinet. However, Stockemer's survey did not include Taiwan, whereas no such correlation was evident in our findings. Instead, the increase in women's representation appears to be correlated with the reduction in total cabinet members to 40 in May 2024.

Despite the one-step-forward, two-step-backwards progress toward gender equality at the ministerial level, there has been a gradual increase in women's representation in other areas of governance, such as senior-ranked bureaucratic roles. In Taiwan's government, sub-cabinet officials are not appointed by the President but are instead promoted through a system where a combination of merit-based evaluations and seniority criteria determines appointments. An observation of women in senior-ranked bureaucratic roles reveals a gradual increase over time, including during President Tsai's tenure. As shown in [Table 2](#), there has been a consistent upward trend in women's representation in these positions (from almost 15 to 40 % from 2000 through to 2023), reflecting broader shifts toward gender inclusion within the administrative structure. Despite gains in civil services, the cabinet remains a stronghold of male dominance, limiting Taiwan's gender equality agenda when left unchecked by institutional reform. The mixed progress underscores the complexities of achieving substantive gender equality within Taiwan's political system, where structural and cultural barriers continue to constrain women's participation at the highest levels of decision-making.

#### 4.1.2. Proportion of female legislators

As shown in [Table 3](#), between 2016 and 2024, the percentage of all female legislators steadily increased from 38.05 to 41.59 %. [Tables 4 and 5](#) show the percentages of female district legislators and female proportional representative (PR) legislators, showing upward trends (six seats are reserved for Indigenous peoples). The promulgation of gender quotas in 2005 required each political party to nominate women to 50 % of the PR seats ([Huang, 2016](#), p.331; [Yang, 2014](#), p.147). The two leading parties, the DPP and KMT, amended their protocols for nomination to ensure that at least 25 % of nominees for elections and key posts would be women ([Yang, 2014](#), p.148). As a result, since 2008, the proportion of female PR legislators has remained between 50 and 55 %. Between 2008 and 2024, the proportion of female district legislators increased from 21.92 to 35.62 %.

#### 4.1.3. Contextualising Taiwan's case in the regional context

Taiwan's case is unique because of the considerable gender disparity in women's representation in Taiwan's legislature and cabinet. This is evidenced by the fact that, in other East Asian and Southeast Asian

**Table 2**

Proportion of women in senior rank of bureaucrats before and during Tsai's Term (%) (chosen years correspond to [Tables 3, 4 and 5](#)).

| Year | Number of Women | Proportion of Women |
|------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 2000 | 1225            | 14.82               |
| 2004 | 1587            | 18.63               |
| 2008 | 2072            | 22.75               |
| 2012 | 2352            | 27.87               |
| 2016 | 2865            | 32.46               |
| 2020 | 3711            | 37.18               |
| 2023 | 4142            | 39.38               |

Source: author compiled from [Ministry of Civil Service \(n.d.\)](#).

**Table 3**

Total Legislative Yuan gender ratio (May 2008 to May 2024).

| Year | Number of Women | Proportion of Women  |
|------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 2008 | 34              | 30.09 %              |
| 2012 | 38              | 33.63 % <sup>a</sup> |
| 2016 | 43              | 38.05 %              |
| 2020 | 47              | 41.59 % <sup>b</sup> |
| 2024 | 47              | 41.59 %              |

Source: Author compiled from [Central Election Committee \(n.d., 2009a, 2009b, 2012a, 2012b, 2016a, 2016b, 2020a, 2020b, 2024a, 2024b\)](#).

<sup>a</sup> Following the 2015 by-elections in Nantou 2 and Changhua 4, the male candidates Lin Ming-chen (KMT) and Wei Ming-ku (DPP) were respectively replaced by female representatives Hsu Shu-Hua (KMT) and Chen Su-yueh (DPP), resulting in a female proportion of 35.40 %, with 40 women holding seats in total.

<sup>b</sup> Following the by-elections in Taichung 2 (2022) and Taipei 3 (2023), the male candidates Chen Po-Wei (DPP) and Chiang Wan-an (KMT) were respectively succeeded by female representatives Lin Ching-yi (DPP) and Wang Hung-wei (KMT). As a result, the proportion of female legislators in Taiwan reached a historic high of 43.36 %, with 49 women holding seats among the total 113 legislators.

**Table 4**

District legislators' gender ratio in Legislative Yuan (out of 73 seats, May 2008 to May 2024).

| Year | Number of Women | Proportion of Women |
|------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 2008 | 16              | 21.92 %             |
| 2012 | 19              | 26.03 %             |
| 2016 | 23              | 31.51 %             |
| 2020 | 25              | 34.25 %             |
| 2024 | 26              | 35.62 %             |

Source: Author compiled from [Central Election Committee \(2009b, 2012b, 2016b, 2020b, 2024b\)](#).

**Table 5**

Proportional representative (PR) gender ratio in Taiwan (out of 34 seats, May 2008 to May 2024).

| Year | KMT | DPP | TSU | PFP | TPP | NPP | Number of Women | Proportion of Women |
|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------|---------------------|
| 2008 | 10  | 7   | 0   | 0   | –   | –   | 17              | 50.00 %             |
| 2012 | 8   | 7   | 2   | 1   | –   | –   | 18              | 52.94 %             |
| 2016 | 6   | 9   | 0   | 2   | –   | 1   | 18              | 52.94 %             |
| 2020 | 7   | 7   | 0   | 0   | 3   | 2   | 19              | 55.88 %             |
| 2024 | 7   | 7   | 0   | 0   | 4   | 0   | 18              | 52.94 %             |

Source: Author compiled from [Central Election Committee \(2009a, 2012a, 2016a, 2020a, 2024a\)](#)

countries, female heads of governments did have male-dominant cabinets, while during their tenure, the proportion of women in the parliaments was equally low. Although Taiwan stands out as a regional leader in women's political representation, we contest [Joshi and Goehrung's \(2018\)](#) categorisation of Taiwan as a 'balanced type' in women's leadership across governmental institutions,<sup>3</sup> as women's representation in Taiwan is characterised by stronger representation in parliament

<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that Taiwan's representation is relatively balanced compared to other developing countries in Asia, as [Joshi and Goehrung \(2018\)](#) suggest, but we agree with other Taiwan feminist scholars' perspective that the gender disparity between the cabinet and legislature is considerable ([Huang, 2022](#)).

compared to the executive and judiciary. Despite having a female president, as shown in Table 6, Taiwan only shares partial similarities with other Asian nations, such as South Korea and the Philippines, in terms of having male-dominant cabinets, while Taiwan also differs from these countries, as Taiwan has a considerably higher proportion of women in the parliament.

From the perspective of partial gender quotas, the disparity between the proportion of female cabinet ministers and legislators in Taiwan reflects the uneven application and outcomes of gender-inclusive policies across governmental institutions. While Taiwan's legislature has benefited from gender quotas, which have increased the representation of women to a notable degree, these measures have not been extended to or mirrored within the executive branch. This creates a significant imbalance, where women's presence in parliament far exceeds their representation in the cabinet. Such a disparity underscores the limitations of 'partial' gender quotas in addressing systemic gender inequality. This dynamic positions Taiwan within broader regional patterns, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive adoption of gender quotas and a more context-specific, integrated and expansive approach to achieving gender equality in politics.

#### 4.2. Lack of discussion of the low female cabinet representation in the Gender Equality Committee of the Executive Yuan

##### 4.2.1. The establishment of the Gender Equality Committee of the Executive Yuan

The Gender Equality Committee of the Executive Yuan (GECEY) (n.d. a, pp.9–10) is a cross-ministerial organisation, the general meetings of which are chaired by the Premier and are attended by all cabinet members along with scholars, NGO representatives, and activists invited to provide professional insight into gender-related issues raised by GECEY staff members, or to propose new initiatives (ibid). The meetings often start with briefs made by a GECEY staff member, followed by a discussion of agenda issues and extempore motions for new initiatives. General meetings are held every four months, each lasting approximately 3 hours (ibid).

The GECEY evolved from the task force-level Committee of Women's Rights Promotion (CWRP), established by the Executive Yuan in May 1997. Prior to the restructuring of the Executive Yuan in January 2012, the CWRP was operated by eight commissions, which convened 37 committee meetings and five extraordinary sessions. Notable achievements during this period included the enactment of the Act of Gender Equality in Employment and Gender Equity Education Act, the formulation of the White Paper on Gender Equity Education, the enactment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

Against Women (CEDAW) Enforcement Act, and the development of the Gender Equality Policy Guidelines.

Following the Executive Yuan's reorganisation in January 2012, the CWRP was expanded and became the GECEY. GECEY assists in integrating gender equality policies across the central and local governments to ensure gender mainstreaming is practised at all levels of governmental agencies (GECEY, n.d.b).

In other East Asian democratic countries, organisations with structures and functions analogous to the GECEY have been established to advance gender equality. In Japan, the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality was set up within the Cabinet in 1994. As part of the reorganisation of the Central Government in January 2001, the Council for Gender Equality and the Gender Equality Bureau (GEB) were established within the Cabinet Office under the leadership of the Prime Minister (GEB, n.d.a). The Council for Gender Equality, chaired by the Chief Cabinet Secretary, comprises 12 cabinet members appointed by the Prime Minister and 12 scholars and specialists in relevant fields (GEB, n.d.b). The GEW is tasked with formulating and coordinating comprehensive plans to promote a gender-equal society.

Similarly, in South Korea, the Presidential Committee on Women's Affairs was established in 1998 under the direct supervision of the President to oversee and coordinate women's policies (MOGEF, n.d.). In January 2001, the Ministry of Gender Equality was established to further these goals, with an expanded mandate to combat gender discrimination through legislative and regulatory measures (ibid). In March 2010, the ministerial organisation evolved into the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF), tasked with coordinating policies for women, families and youths (ibid).

##### 4.2.2. An analysis of the archived notes of the GECEY meetings

An analysis of all archived notes of the GECEY general meetings held between 2012 and 2024 found that the issue of low female cabinet representation was only raised three times (once each at the 13th, 16th, and 21st meetings) (GECEY, 2016, 2017, 2020a). At the 13th meeting, immediately following Tsai's first inauguration and the formation of her cabinet, the issue was raised as a report item (*bàogào-àn*, 報告案) rather than a discussion item (*tǎolùn-àn*, 討論案), which would require further discussion and resolution (GECEY, 2016). The agenda item proposed by the International Affairs and Public Participation section suggested that future cabinet appointments should prioritise the recruitment of women. At the 16th and 21st meetings, the issue was merely raised in committee members' comments without resulting in a formal proposal. For example, shortly after Tsai began her second term, committee member He Bi-zhen noted that, although gender quotas were achieved in other central committees, the percentage of female cabinet members remained below 20 %. She mentioned that the former Executive Yuan Premier, Lin Chuan, had noted reluctance among qualified female candidates to join the cabinet. Nonetheless, she hoped more efforts could be made to enhance female participation. In contrast, issues related to female representation in other sectors, including central committees and the boards of directors in both public and private companies, were raised in at least seven general meetings (2nd, 7th, 10th, 21st, 22nd, 24th, and 25th) (GECEY, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2022a). Significant efforts to secure gender quotas were highlighted by a discussion proposal to ensure that state-owned enterprises achieve a gender ratio of no less than one-third for either gender (21st GECEY meeting)(GECEY, 2020a).

Notably, the general meeting held right after the fourth review cycle of the implementation of the CEDAW, which was introduced to Taiwan's domestic legal framework in 2011, in 2022 started with a brief on the gender equality achievements that brought Taiwan international acknowledgement (GECEY, 2022a, 2022b):

*Agenda: Achievements of Gender Equality International Engagements in 2023*

**Table 6**

Proportion of women in cabinets and parliaments during the most recent tenure of female heads of governments.

| Country        | President/<br>Prime Minister  | Tenure    | Proportion of<br>Women in<br>Cabinets | Proportion of<br>Women in<br>Parliaments |
|----------------|-------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Taiwan         | Tsai Ying-Wen                 | 2016–2024 | 7.32 % ~<br>14.60 %                   | 38.1 % ~ 41.6<br>%                       |
| Indonesia      | Megawati<br>Sukarnoputri      | 2001–2004 | 6.06 %                                | 8 % ~ 11.1 %                             |
| Philippines    | Gloria<br>Macapagal<br>Arroyo | 2001–2010 | 9.1 % ~ 25 %                          | 11.3 % ~ 21.4<br>%                       |
| South<br>Korea | Park Geun-hye                 | 2013–2017 | 5.9 % ~ 11.8<br>%                     | 15.7 % ~ 17.0<br>%                       |
| Thailand       | Yingluck<br>Shinawatra        | 2011–2014 | 8.3 % ~ 8.7 %                         | 6.1 % ~ 15.8 %                           |

Source: author compiled from IPU (n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004), Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia (n.d.), UN (2005), World Bank (n.d.-c, n.d.-d).

1. In recent years, Taiwan has been praised internationally for upholding freedom, democracy, and universal values of human rights. In February (2022), the British 'Economist Intelligence Unit' released its 'Democracy Index', ranking Taiwan as number one in Asia; last month, 'Reporters without Borders' released its 'World Press Freedom Index', ranking Taiwan in the top position. In terms of gender equality, Taiwan has achieved three 'firsts of Asia', including being the first Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage and having the highest female legislative representation rate; according to the UN 2019 Gender Inequality Index, Taiwan's gender equality performance ranked number one in Asia. These achievements have not only brought Taiwan international recognition but also have enabled us to significantly improve our relationships with countries that share similar beliefs and values.

As can be seen in the meeting note, the brief selectively spelt out Taiwan's 'three firsts of Asia' in the field of gender equality while conveniently omitting the fact that Taiwan had very consistently low female cabinet representation rates under Tsai's administration, with representation plummeting to just 6.98 % in May 2020. According to 'Women in Politics Map 2021', which ranked countries in terms of female representation in executive and government positions, Taiwan's 6.98 % representation rate would have ranked 164 or 165 if Taiwan had been included (International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2021).

#### 4.3. The gap between women's representation in legislature and cabinet

The proportion of female cabinet ministers in Taiwan decreased with the election of Taiwan's first female president, while female representation in Taiwan's legislature increased from 2016 through 2024. Exploring the data with reference to the 'partial gender quotas' conceptual framework, we offer three possible explanations of the disparity between women's representation in the cabinet and the legislature. First, legislative apportionment is governed by gender quotas, while cabinet appointments are subject to the authority of the President and Premier and are not subject to such quota restrictions. Appointments typically prioritise candidates' professional backgrounds and factional political considerations. Tsai's cabinet was largely gender-blind in terms of feminist politics, and the administration adopted an instrumentalist approach to gender mainstreaming (Chien, 2024). DPP factional politics and the challenges of Taiwan's patriarchal and male-centric politics had nearly derailed Tsai's presidential run due to the intervention of chauvinist senior party factional leaders and funders such as Koo Kwang-ming (辜寬敏) and Wu Li-Pei (吳澹培) following a landslide defeat in the 2018 local elections (Yang, 2019). DPP has promoted some significant gender-equality laws and policies, but DPP's male-centric politicians still co-exist with progressive party members (Wang, 1998; Yang, 2001, 2019). While Tsai promoted an image as 'Taiwan's mother' later in her presidency (Blanchard, 2024), she largely downplayed the significance of her gender in her status as a leader or member of the political elite (Lee, 2021). DPP factional competition and their male leaders' chauvinistic tendencies (e.g. Ker Chien-ming [柯建銘]) also prevented the promotion of policy initiatives to address gender inequalities. In contrast, Taiwan's legislature represents diverse voices and marginalised groups, including women, at least at the institutional level. Hence, this research contends that substantive gender equality in the political field requires the implementation of explicit gender quotas and changes in the male-dominated political culture.

Secondly, the GECEY, as a cross-ministerial committee which can oversee the progress of gender mainstreaming at all levels, has yet to propose an effective solution to problematic gender disparity. As mentioned previously, the GECEY, expanded from the Department of Gender Equality following the reorganisation of the Executive Yuan in 2012, is responsible for initiating and promoting a gender equality policy agenda across the government and monitoring the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies and measures (Fan & Wu, 2016).

Undeniably, the GECEY has played an active role in improving women's inclusion and participation in both the government and the private sector by promoting the formal and informal participation of civil organisations in decision-making processes (Hwang & Wu, 2019). Following a local significant #MeToo movement in the summer of 2023, the GECEY also coordinated with the Legislative Yuan to amend three key laws related to gender equality to further protect the rights of whistleblowers and those bringing accusations of sexual harassment in workplaces and schools (Lin, 2024; GECEY, 2024). However, the GECEY has made no substantial effort to promote women's ministerial leadership.

The third explanation concerns the lack of female role model effect between female political leaders and non-elites. Not only have President Tsai and female cabinet ministers not presented themselves as role models for women and girls by sharing their journeys toward female leaders via public media, but they also accentuate their 'successes' on the foundation of professionalism, expertise and relevant technocratic and meritocratic factors. This downplaying of gender and seeming lack of interest in inspiring ordinary women and girls to aspire to leadership positions differs significantly from the practices of Lü Hsiu-lien (呂秀蓮), the first female vice president, who consistently emphasised her feminist stance and was outspoken about gender issues (Tang & Teng, 2016). In contrast, Tsai Ing-wen has adopted a rather reserved attitude toward emphasising feminine traits in speeches and interviews (Chen, 2012). Catering to gender-blind voters, she has instead adopted a pragmatic strategy that avoids publicly speaking about her gender identity as a woman. In 2020, when asked by an American interviewer about how women handle pressure resulting from gender role prescriptions in a patriarchal society, Tsai emphasised the role of women's thoughts and decisions as individuals in their success in political participation while de-emphasising the societal and institutional obstacles facing female politicians (Tamir, 2020).<sup>4</sup> She also stressed a meritocratic view in explaining the high proportion of female legislators in parliament while overlooking the issue of low female representation in her cabinet. This low degree of representation in the cabinet and lack of female role-model effect is symptomatic of a lack of feminist consciousness among female leaders in the Tsai administration (Brysk, 2021; Lee, 2021), which at least partially explains why the election of Taiwan's first female president failed to generate a positive trickle-down effect for the cabinet in Tsai's second term.

Viewed through Khoban's (2023) lens of the 'politics of presence', combined with Wahman et al.'s (2021, p.360) argument, a female leader can be a powerful symbol that challenges existing gender norms and further inspires women's political engagement and participation. For instance, Anne Hidalgo, the first female Mayor of Paris, and Angela Rayner, the first female Deputy Prime Minister of the UK, often publicly express their pride in being a woman in leadership positions (Ryan, 2024; Wendell, 2024). In July 2024, *British Vogue* published an in-depth interview with Rayner (Ryan, 2024), in which she openly discussed how she overcame a difficult childhood and teen motherhood to establish a successful political career. Her proud self-identification as a female leader manifested in her detailed recounts of her experiences of caring for her mother through bouts of mental illness, enduring puberty without access to feminine sanitary products, and raising a child as a teen mother. Earning a degree through the Open University, she became the leader of UNISON North West, the UK's largest trade union, paving the way for election to the UK Parliament in 2015. She portrays her

<sup>4</sup> Interview excerpt: Interviewer: *Many women feel a pressure from society to get married and have kids. How do you deal with it and how do you suggest others might deal with it? Because it can be very strong, especially here in Asia.* Tsai: *It's the thinking of the woman themselves that count. You don't have to be that mindful of your gender... The voters would have a preference for women when they think that women are equally competitive... abilities and otherwise, then they would give preference to woman. So that's why we have 40 % of all legislators are woman.*



success and current leadership role as being grounded in her life experiences of overcoming countless frustrations faced by working-class women. While Tory female leaders, including Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May, rarely discussed their gender, Rayner has, to a degree, redefined female leadership in the UK by embracing feminine traits and female bodily experiences as a political leader, advancing reforms that specifically promote the well-being and advancement of women.

Over two decades ago, Reingold (2000, p.2) posed the question, 'Does the election of more and more women mean that women will be better represented?' While increasing the number of women in politics has laid a foundation for gender equality, challenges remain in realising the symbolic and policy implications for democratic decision-making, particularly through the emergence of a quantifiable 'critical mass'. As this paper demonstrates, female leaders are not necessarily feminist leaders. As mentioned above, while Tsai Ing-wen was an elected leader, she did not embody the characteristics of a feminist female leader. To ensure that women's representation is not undermined by non-feminist political leaders, the implementation of a gender quota system in the cabinet is essential. A feminist leader like Rayner has overcome frustrations and challenges specific to women, explicitly seeking to inspire other women to do the same, potentially having a positive impact on deconstructing the gendered structures, processes and institutional norms and practices (Beckwith, 2007; Ryan, 2024). This mode of female political leadership is still under development in Taiwan and other East Asian countries. Institutionalising gender quotas for cabinet appointments could be a meaningful first step to addressing gender disparities, and the processes of such appointments should also emphasise the nurturing of female role models.

Taiwan regularly touts its experience of democratisation, linked with its constitutional and legal safeguards for liberty, human rights, and gender equality, including women's social and political representation (Brysk, 2021; Chang, 2024). This study shows that, between 2016 and 2024, the 'positive trickle-down effects' of women's political representation did not, in fact, extend to Taiwan's presidential cabinet or the Executive Yuan and were barely a factor across constitutional organs (i.e., translating from the Legislative Yuan to the Executive Yuan). This highlights the limitations of the politics of presence where, on the one hand, women's presence in one political arena does not automatically and necessarily result in women's inclusion in all areas but, on the other hand, women's access to ministerial roles is still important in promoting women's influence in managerial and decision-making processes.

## 5. Concluding remarks

While Taiwan is widely recognised as a democracy committed to gender equality, a stark disparity persists between women's representation in its legislature and presidential cabinet. Drawing on 'partial gender quotas' as our conceptual framework, this study examines the three institutional and political-cultural factors contributing to this imbalance. Although our study does not aim to be a comparative analysis, an in-depth examination of countries like Japan (which has never had a female prime minister) or South Korea (which is particularly interesting regarding Park Geun-hye's tenure) may be useful. Such comparisons may offer valuable insights into the dynamics of women's political leadership in Asia and would be an important avenue for future research. That said, we hope our current focus on Taiwan's unique trajectory and challenges contributes meaningfully to the broader discourse on gender and political representation in the region.

Echoing other feminist studies on substantive female political participation, our findings support the argument that female political leadership is essential for challenging dominant gender norms, reducing gender segregation in lower ranks through positive trickle-down effects, and dismantling gendered organisational structures (Fellegi et al., 2023; Huang, 2015, 2016, 2022; Kabeer, 2005; Mendiratta, 2023; Stockemer, 2017; Wahman et al., 2021; Yang, 2014). However, despite Taiwan's historic achievement of electing its first female president, substantive

female political participation has not yet been realised. President Tsai Ing-wen's tenure, while marked by progressive reforms such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage and advocacy for LGBTIQ rights, did not result in a significant positive trickle-down effect in her cabinet's gender composition. This study does not seek to negate her contributions but rather questions the assumed feminist consciousness of female political leaders (Littler, 2017; Mendiratta, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2015).

While this study is constrained by the lack of transparency in cabinet appointments, it underscores the urgent need for institutional mechanisms to address partial gender quotas and challenge male-dominated political cultures. The institutional and political-cultural constraints of Taiwan's party politics and the male-centric political environment have stifled progress, perpetuating male dominance in the cabinet (Huang, 2022; Khoban, 2023). These findings align with Esping-Andersen's (2009) observation that incomplete gender revolutions, marked by a lack of shifts in men's roles, can undermine women's empowerment and exacerbate inequalities. Therefore, wider adoption of gender quotas across constitutional organs and broader cultural shifts are needed to improve gender equality in Taiwan.

This study, we believe, holds global implications, particularly in addressing the precarious achievements toward gender equality worldwide. Despite decades of gender mainstreaming efforts by the UN and individual countries, significant challenges remain, including the rise of the global anti-gender and anti-woke movement (Guney et al., 2022). To advance women's political representation and participation in a more substantive manner and to radically transform patriarchal political cultures, it is essential to adopt a critical stance against superficial progress and, more importantly, against backlash movements that threaten to undermine women's rights. In response to these challenges, we argue that institutionalising gender equality initiatives, such as gender quotas across governments, is crucial to safeguarding the hard-won progress achieved by earlier feminists.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Chiu-Wan Liu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Anne Fan An Chen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Po-Han Lee:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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