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**Symbolic Breakthroughs and Gendered Limits of Power: A Comparative Study of
Female Leadership in Japan and South Korea**

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Abstract

Significant global progress has been achieved for women's political representation, however, the relationship between female executive leadership and substantive gender equality remains contested. This thesis examines this specific phenomenon, focusing on East Asia, where South Korea and Japan, considered among the most economically advanced democracies, consistently rank at the bottom of gender equality rankings despite producing historic female executives. Highlighting the cases of Park Geun-hye, South Korea's first female president (2013-2017), and Sanae Takaichi, elected in late 2025 as Japan's first female prime minister, this thesis asks: "How do the conservative and nationalist political contexts in Japan and South Korea mediate the relationship between female executive leadership and substantive gender reform?" By adopting a comparative qualitative research design and a most similar systems design, the two leaders are analysed across four analytically derived categories. The thesis concludes that conservative and nationalist political environments produce symbolic breakthroughs without structural transformation through three mechanisms: legitimization through masculine authority structures, institutional absorption of gender equality mechanisms and nationalist symbolic framing. The findings caution against drawing conclusions about a country's gender equality from the presence or absence of female leaders, and contribute to feminist institutionalist and gender and nationalism literatures.

Abstract (in German)

Trotz bedeutender Fortschritte in der politischen Repräsentation von Frauen bleibt die Beziehung zwischen weiblicher Führung auf Exekutivebene und substanzieller Geschlechtergleichstellung umstritten. Diese Arbeit untersucht dieses Phänomen am Beispiel Ostasiens, wo Südkorea und Japan trotz historischer weiblicher Führungspersönlichkeiten konstant zu den Ländern mit der größten Geschlechterungleichheit zählen. Anhand der Fälle von Park Geun-hye, Südkoreas erster Präsidentin (2013–2017), und Sanae Takaichi, Japans erster Premierministerin (seit 2025), wird folgende Frage untersucht: Wie vermitteln die konservativen und nationalistischen politischen Kontexte in Japan und Südkorea die Beziehung zwischen weiblicher Führung und substanzieller Geschlechterreform? Die Arbeit kommt zu dem Schluss, dass konservative und nationalistische

politische Umfelder symbolische Durchbrüche ohne strukturellen Wandel erzeugen — durch Legitimation über maskuline Autoritätsstrukturen, institutionelle Absorption von Gleichstellungsmechanismen und nationalistische symbolische Rahmung. Die Ergebnisse mahnen zur Vorsicht bei Rückschlüssen auf die Geschlechtergleichstellung eines Landes allein aufgrund der An- oder Abwesenheit weiblicher Führungspersönlichkeiten.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.	1
1.1. Context and Background	1
1.2 Research Question	4
1.3 Chapter Outline	4
2. Literature Review.	4
2.1 Feminist Scholarship on Nation and Gender	5
2.2 Women in Conservative, Radical Right and Nationalist Politics	6
2.3 Gendered Institutions, Leadership and Framing	8
3. Theoretical Framework.	10
3.1 Gendered Nationalism	11
3.2 Masculinised Executive Leadership	12
3.3 Interaction	15
4. Methodology.	15
5. Context and Historical Background.	18
5.1 Global Gender Equality Frameworks	18
5.2 Gender and Political Development in Asia	19
5.3 Political Systems and Agency of Women in Japan and South Korea	21
5.3.1 Confucian Legacies	21
5.3.2 Women's Agency in South Korea and Japan	24
6. Executive Masculinity	26
6.1 Leadership and Political Capital	26
6.1.1 South Korea	26
6.1.2 Japan	34
6.2 Party Constitution	40
6.2.1 South Korea	40
6.2.2 Japan	42
7. Gendered Nationalism	45
7.1 Policy Orientation and Gender Advocacy	45
7.1.1 South Korea	45

7.1.2 Japan	50
7.2 Nationalist Positioning	53
7.2.1 South Korea	53
7.2.2 Japan	54
8. Cross-Case Comparison	55
8.1 Routes to Power	55
8.2 Hegemonic Masculinity in Practice	55
8.3 Substantive Representation	56
8.4 Nationalism and the Gender Activism Gap	56
8.5 Symbolic Breakthroughs and Structural Continuity	57
9. Conclusion	57
10. Bibliography.	60

1. Introduction.

1.1. Context and Background

The inclusion of women in decision-making positions is often celebrated as a milestone in achieving gender equality. United Nations (UN) resolutions, among them numerous World Conferences on Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, have called for the inclusion of women in their respective countries' political life and the elimination of all forms of discrimination that prevent them from being elected to public office.¹ They have emphasized that women's participation in political life is essential to broader social, economic, and democratic progress (United Nations 1995; United Nations 2025).

In line with these commitments, significant progress has been made in the global effort to eliminate inequality and discrimination, as recognized by UN Women, and as seen by the collaborative efforts of states and civil society to address these issues. What is more, in the years between the World Conference in Beijing in 1995 and the world economic crisis in 2008, various gender-equality policies in fields, such as participation in politics, labor market and prevention of violence against women, were adopted (Roggeband and Krizsán 2018, 368). Much of the existing literature has therefore operated on the assumption that increased female political participation would translate into broader gender equality gains.

However, this linear understanding has increasingly been challenged. More recent developments point to instances of “backsliding” - a phenomenon where states go back on their previous commitments with regards to gender-equality norms in their countries (Roggeband and Krizsán 2018, 368-370). Consequently, the relationship between women's political representation and substantive gender equality outcomes appears less straightforward than previously assumed. Thereby, despite the above-mentioned commitments and visible growth in women's representation in electoral offices, the global landscape remains imbalanced, and gender inequality persists (Thwala 2023, 113-114).

Within this broader global context, East Asia presents a particularly compelling case. Women's political representation in the region is often characterized as a paradox. On the one hand, women

¹ More detailed explanation on the global gender equality frameworks can be found in the context and background chapter.

as a group have become indispensable to electoral politics, influencing outcomes through voting behavior and civic engagement. On the other hand, their access to appointive and elective office remains limited across most levels of government (Iwanaga 2008, 1). This disconnect is especially striking given the high levels of economic development, education and democratic consolidation, visible in countries like Japan and South Korea. It raises a fundamental question - despite these structural advancements, why does women's systematic representation remain limited? More broadly, it calls into question the assumption that socio-economic progress and increased political participation automatically translate into greater gender equality in positions of power.

At the same time, the region of Asia as a whole, has produced a striking number of female heads of government and state, often going against the expectations of Western observers (Ko 2025, 25). Asian societies are often depicted as homogenous, traditionalist or resistant to gender equality given their history and delayed progress, usually owing to widespread Orientalist tropes. Yet, in many of the poorer countries women's proportion in parliament is higher, as for example in Bangladesh, India and Indonesia, just to name a few (Iwanaga 2008, 24). This suggests that political systems characterized by male dominance can nevertheless produce female leaders under certain conditions.

However, the presence of women leaders does not necessarily correlate with broader gender equality for women as a group. Indeed, international indicators such as those produced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2025) consistently show that in prosperous and developed societies like Japan and South Korea, measures of gender equality are quite low. That is despite being successful in educational and professional occupation sectors and having elevated women to executive leadership.

Here, making sense of both the Gender Inequality Index (GII) and Gender Gap Index (GGI) would be helpful to explain this difference. The GGI index developed in 2006 by the WEF takes into account economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment, which can be viewed as the gaps, outputs and equality measures. It ranks countries based on their gender equality instead of female empowerment (Song 2025, 58; Barnat, MacFeely, and Peltola 2019, 6). The GII, published in 2013, is a measurement from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which focuses on reproductive health, empowerment and labour market participation, or in other words on levels, inputs and capabilities (Song 2025, 58; Barnat, MacFeely, and Peltola resulting 2019, 7; UNDP 2023). Both aim to quantify gender

inequality, however, they use different methodologies and indicators, in some cases in vastly different rankings for the same country and there are significant differences when it comes to South Korea and Japan. Both often rank poorly in the GGI but very high in the GII (Song 2025, 58). This signifies that there are mechanisms which advance women's education and political participation, however when it comes to making a tangible difference, there are several challenges that prevent women from making a significant impact, as they are still heavily constrained (Park 2023).

Two very important cases exemplify this tension clearly: the rise of Park Geun-hye in 2013 as the first female president in the history of South Korea and secondly Sanae Takaichi being elected as Japan's first female prime minister in late 2025. Both leaders represent historic breakthroughs within the political systems of their respective countries, which have long been dominated by conservative parties and male elites. Within this context, Park and Takaichi are exceptional since they represent elite cases of women breaking through entrenched hierarchies, demonstrating that female leadership in East Asia is possible even where gender equality statistics remain low. The growing number of women securing the coveted "first" in various high-level government posts demonstrating the depth of the gender gap (Andreeva 2019, 11).

Despite the differences in their rise to power and specific country contexts, both leaders appear to have adopted conservative policy priorities while selectively promoting initiatives for women. For example, Park Geun-hye proposed several women-related policies such as childcare provision and shorter working hours for pregnant employees, but her moves were not consistent. Additionally, she did not pursue structural reforms like gender quotas and nominated very few women to high-ranking political posts, earning her the title of a "woman presidency without women" (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 612). Likewise, Takaichi's political agenda so far has mostly focused on Japan's national security, while still pushing for change in certain areas. Still, the gender imbalance in her party and in the Diet remains evident (Dalton 2026).

This highlights another important point and a recurring pattern: their leadership does not necessarily dismantle the glass ceiling for the majority of women or lead to a transformative structural change. Patterns like these do not necessarily indicate failure, nor do they imply that female leadership is inherently transformative. They do, however, point to a bigger puzzle concerning the interaction between the rise of women in political offices and how do they relate to broader patterns of gendered power and institutional change. In particular, the role of conservative political structures and nationalist discourses may shape both the opportunities available to women leaders and the extent to which gender-related reforms are pursued.

1.2 Research Question

This thesis therefore focuses on the interaction between gender, conservatism, and nationalism in shaping both leadership practices and policy outcomes in the context of South Korea and Japan. Accordingly, the central research question is as follows: “How do the conservative and nationalist political contexts in Japan and South Korea mediate the relationship between female executive leadership and substantive gender reform?”

1.3 Chapter Outline

This thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature across three categories, which are feminist theories of nation and gender, women in conservative and nationalist politics, and gendered institutions and leadership framing. After the literature review, the theoretical framework chapter presents arguments from Connell, Yuval-Davis, and Enloe. Chapter 4 explains the methodology, including justification of research design, case selection, analytical categories, and some limitations. Chapter 5 delves into the historical and contextual background, providing global, regional, and case-specific information. Chapters 6 and 7 are the empirical core of the thesis, with chapter 6 examining executive masculinity and chapter 7 looking at gendered nationalism. The following chapter brings common threads for the selected cases and directly compares them. Finally, chapter 9 is the conclusion, and it answers the research question, sets out theoretical contributions, and suggests ideas for future research.

2. Literature Review.

The scholarship that studies women state leaders in relation to conservative parties can broadly be divided in three categories: (1) feminist scholarship on nation and gender, (2) women in conservative, radical right and nationalist politics, and (3) gendered institutions, leadership and framing. First, feminist scholarship on nation and gender examines how nationalism and belonging are constructed through gendered hierarchies. Second, research on women in conservative and radical right politics explore how women participate and shape these movements that are often assumed to marginalise them. Third, the scholarship on gendered institutions and framing shows that masculinised norms constrain female leadership and interpret it within institutional and media con-

texts. Taken together, these categories offer important insights and address the symbolic, institutional, and ideological aspects of the puzzle. However, limitations remain, notably regarding the rise of conservative women to executive power in non-Western contexts, as scholarship has developed primarily through Western cases, leaving non-conservative non-Western contexts comparatively undertheorised.

2.1 Feminist Scholarship on Nation and Gender

Traditionally, discussions on nation and nationalism have primarily been “by men about men”, treating the male experience as universal and marginalising women’s roles (Thapar-Björkert 2013, 806). Take for example, Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” from his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). The term is widely influential and has been used to conceptualise the nation and analyse nationalism, but it does not pay much attention to gender.

Starting in the late 1980s, however, female scholarship started to address women’s positioning in the national project and on their role as agents and keepers of collective national identity (Thomson 2019, 4). Feminist scholars like McClintock have extended and critiqued frameworks like Anderson’s by demonstrating the gendered nature of nations and nationalism. In the book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), McClintock argues that “all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous [...] in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence” (pp. 352). She contends that while nations are indeed constructed, they are also built upon and sustained by gender hierarchies, which a lot of major scholars had previously largely ignored. No nation has given men and women equal access to the rights and resources of the state (McClintock 1995, 353). Nationalism defines the differences and political power between them by often positioning women in subordinate or symbolic roles. As a result, nationalism not only shapes collective identities but also dictates gender and power structures in the nation-state.

Contributions by Nagel (1998) and Mayer (2012) extend these arguments by ultimately categorising citizenship and the nation as masculinist projects. Because nationalism, gender and sexuality are both socially and culturally constructed in opposition or at least relation to the Other, they all inherently include in themselves power hierarchies. One nation, or gender or sexuality is always preferred to the other, and the social, political and cultural institutions help construct it and its benefits (Mayer 2012, 5). Furthermore, she asserts that nation is fundamentally a masculinist project and a male domain, where the “national ego” is inseparable from gender and sexuality. Since

the nation was constructed as a heterosexual male, its “ego” is already connected to patriarchal norms and hierarchies, which enable men to achieve superiority by exhibiting masculine prowess (Mayer 2012, 6). This further emphasizes the construction of “us” versus “them” as the empowerment of one almost always occurs at the disempowerment of the other. Thereby, this article shows how the nation itself is “sexed” and highlights how the nation is never a gender-neutral entity. Nagel (1998) further posits that women still play a role in the making and unmaking of states, both as citizens and as leaders. However, the scripts in which these roles are embedded are written mostly by, for and about men, thereby placing women in supporting roles.

This body of literature demonstrates how nationalism is a deeply gendered project and also the symbolic, cultural and institutional mechanisms through which gendered power operates and is reproduced. A limitation of the literature is that it tends to focus more on women as symbols of the nation than as political leaders who exhibit executive authority.

2.2 Women in Conservative, Radical Right and Nationalist Politics

A second body of literature looks at women’s complex relationship with conservative, radical right and nationalist politics. More recent scholarship complicates the assumption that right-wing and nationalist politics are uniformly hostile or exclusionary to women and shows the ways in which women actively participate and shape conservative movements.

Here, an important debate emerges. Downing (2018, 367-368) emphasises the paradoxical status of right-wing women who are often treated as “doubly aberrant, doubly exceptional figures” because modern Western culture associates women with notions like collectivity and compassion (traditionally linked to the left). She argues that female leaders are framed as “identity category violation”, a linguistic concept used to describe a situation when an individual’s personal identity markers contradict the political affiliations that society expects of them (Downing 2018, 374). Other scholars (Campion 2020; Williams 2024) highlight women’s active and organisational agency within national movements. They criticise the tendency of academic literature to frame radical right movements through the lens of male supremacy, stating that it risks concealing the appeal that it may hold for some women. They reject the common assumption that women in these movements lack choice and agency - instead they contribute to ideology, shape discourses and overall are active creators and managers of the nation, using their agency to navigate and sometimes reform masculinist spaces. Furthermore, the misconception that women are “immune” to the far right is supported by four dominant academic assumptions (Williams 2024, 2). The ‘losers of

modernisation' theory (regarding women's alleged socio-economic security); the idea that feminism naturally repels women from the far right ideology; the argument that due to gendered division of labour and socialisation women tend to care less about politics and the belief that women's higher levels of religiosity protect from the far right, are all outdated stereotypes and fail to reveal their motivations for subscribing to the far right (Williams 2024, 8).

Harteveld and Ivarsflaten (2016) add an important psychological dimension to this field by showing that gender differences in support for radical right parties are not primarily driven by policy preferences, but by something they label as internalised motivation to control prejudice (MCP) (Harteveld and Ivarsflaten 2016, 370). This is the idea that women are more likely to avoid parties associated with prejudice or discrimination, even if they share some of their positions on certain policies, because they have a stronger commitment to social norms. Importantly, they encourage researchers to adopt a more holistic approach to the topic by paying closer attention not only to the historical, political and socio-cultural factors, but also the different ways in which women perform or "do" politics (Williams 2024, 2; 9).

At the party level, O'Brien (2018) and Campbell and Erzeel (2018) demonstrate that there is significant variation between the ideologies of party families. Therefore, instead of simply describing a right-left distinction, these ideological differences and a wide array of gender policies, which can range from highly traditional to more progressive or feminist, should be considered. Furthermore, unlike in left-leaning parties, the presence of a female leader in a right-leaning party does not equate to an increase in female MPs; there is no "letting down the ladder" effect present (or can also be referred to as "trickle-down effect" Iwanaga 2008, 41). This is because right-wing organisations are reluctant to select female leaders who will disrupt the "status quo" (O'Brien 2018, 40). Women are more likely to vote for right-wing parties which exhibit more modern or feminist gender ideology than the ones that promote a more traditional one. This explains why certain center-right parties maintain a majority-female electorate. Additionally, while parties on the left are generally more liberal and feminist there are still attempts from parties on the right to represent feminist women. Ultimately, grouping all right-wing parties under one umbrella risks obscuring the actual causes and consequences of women's underrepresentation and a more nuanced look into a party's internal variations is required. To understand the reasons behind women's support of certain right parties, their gender ideologies should be studied.

In the book *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (2017) the authors argue that gender is central

to the success and survival of contemporary far-right and nationalist movements on the continent. The show that the extreme right strategically deploys gendered discourses as a way to broaden their appeal to voters and normalise or “de-demonise” their public image, without adopting feminist goals (pp. 170). By promoting female figures to prominent roles, these movements signal modernity and more “civilized” face and therefore facilitating the spread and acceptance of their political agendas (pp. 337-338). Ultimately, they argue that women will stabilise the far right, precisely because of this civilised and non-violent face that their presence provides to ideologies that might otherwise be viewed as too radical (pp. 73).

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that women are active political agents instead of merely passive supporters. More recent research also emphasises the importance of individual experiences and socio-psychological factors in shaping women’s engagement, specifically in the context of Japan’s Action Conservative Movement. Yoshida (2024) argues that women’s response to far-right ideology is shaped by various pre-political life experiences, such as economic insecurity caused by the neoliberal market and instances of gender-based violence. He also introduces the concept of “ambivalence”, or simultaneously positive and negative feelings towards something (Yoshida 2024, 3843). Here, this can be understood as this paradox between the more traditional motherly roles and more confrontational forms of political activism (Yoshida 2024, 3839). This reinforces the need to move beyond Western-centred explanations, as they are context-specific motivations behind participation.

Nevertheless, limitations remain. The primary focus on Western cases leaves out conservative non-Western contexts, like East Asia, comparatively undertheorised. As a result, while the articles show why women would support or take part in radical right and nationalist movements, they pay less attention to how gendered participation operates in different regional settings and whether their leadership leads to substantive changes in gender relations or political institutions across diverse political contexts.

2.3 Gendered Institutions, Leadership and Framing

Further literature studies how executive political authority is shaped by gendered norms and expectations. One strand focuses on institutional constraints. Mackay (2014) argues that even new formal institutions that seem to be breaking away from the status quo are not blank states but are instead “nested” within existing gendered environments (pp. 567). She explores the idea that all

institutional innovation is bound by past legacies of masculine-coded norms and power distributions: informal rules, established routines, and gendered expectations limit the extent to which new actors can enact change. She further talks about the "liability of newness" in which fledgling institutions often seek legitimacy by falling back on old or traditionally masculine ways of doing things that blunt the impact of women (Mackay 2014, 556). This is developed from Krook and Mackay's work (2011) who similarly argue that the design and development of institutions is not a gender-neutral arena but should be examined through a gender lens.

A second strand concerns the meaning of representation for women who do reach the highest political positions. Celis and Childs (2018) identify this conservative puzzle - the increased presence of conservative women on the formal political stage who claim to represent women even though their parties are often viewed as detrimental to feminist goals. They argue that feminist outcomes are not the only thing that should be evaluated, but one should look at the process model, in which women's interests are not defined a priori. Moreover, good representation should be guided by three core principles of responsiveness, inclusiveness and egalitarianism, allowing for heterogeneity among women while holding representatives accountable (Celis and Childs 2018, 18). They also caution that there is no single set of women's issues and women's interests and rigidly defining those reduces women's substantive representation (Celis and Childs 2018, 19). Finally, the distinction between descriptive (the presence of woman in office) and substantive (acting on behalf of women's interests) representation clarifies that women's presence in higher positions does not necessarily produce feminist outcomes. This debate builds on Lovenduski (2005; cited in Mackay 2014, 12) who emphasises that the increased presence of women and members of minorities in the House of Commons in the UK did not automatically lead to substantive policy influence. Even with the increased numbers, such institutions remained deeply "exclusionary" and "masculine-gendered", often requiring political actors to adopt dominant forms of competitive masculinity so they can be effective in their respective roles (Lovenduski 2005; cited in Mackay 2014, 12).

The third strand examines the discursive dimension of gendered leadership. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory argues that prejudice against female leaders emerges from a perceived mismatch between gender expectations and leadership requirements. They argue that gender roles or the beliefs about men and women's attributes pertain to agentic and communal characteristics (Eagly and Karau 2002, 574). Leadership is culturally defined by agentic characteristics, such as assertiveness, control and confidence, which are socially ascribed to men. Women are expected to exhibit communal characteristics like affection, nurturance and sensitivity (Eagly and Karau 2002,

574). This leads to two specific forms of prejudice — descriptive and injunctive. First, women may face descriptive prejudice because leadership is seen as more masculine, women are perceived as lacking the agentic qualities required, leading to lower evaluation of their potential. Second, they encounter injunctive prejudice because when women do behave as leaders, when they exhibit more agentic and less communal behavior, they are evaluated negatively for violating the norms of their gender (Eagly and Karau 2002, 576).

These dynamics are reinforced by the study by Leavy (2020) which finds that women receive a higher volume of coverage, suggesting their increased visibility, however this coverage frequently reinforces certain gendered stereotypes. Family relationships and roles content was higher for women, “women’s issues” were consistently associated with women, their communication styles were described as aggressive (for instance “smear”, “shout”), whereas men’s style was more diplomatic (“unite”, “cooperation”) (Leavy 2020, 17). This form of gendered framing reinforces the perception of women leaders as exceptional figures rather than normalized holders of power, as they are more often framed in emotional, personal or appearance-based terms. These seemingly minor differences in linguistic choices and media portrayals can accumulate over time to stabilise the glass ceiling, making it harder for women to ascend to these roles, be perceived as effective and navigate the “narrow band of acceptable behaviour” — combining behaviours that are “somewhat feminine but not too feminine and somewhat masculine but not too masculine.” (Eagly and Karau 2002, 590).

From this literature, women’s transformative potential can be seen as constrained on three interconnected levels — the institutional, representational, and media level — which work together to create and maintain the gendered norms and framing.

3. Theoretical Framework.

The theoretical framework touches on theories of gendered nationalism and masculinised executive authority to provide the theoretical tools through which to analyse the emergence and limitations of female leadership within conservative and nationalist contexts. It situates the two leaders within gendered theories and institutions that both enable and limit their authority and shows how symbolic breakthroughs occur, but constraints remain. This theoretical framework is the most suitable way to answer the research question for several reasons. Firstly, the research question is centred around “mediation”, so how does the political context shape what is possible before and during each leader’s time in office. To understand that one needs to look at the level of structures and

institutions, and not just individual agency. By introducing hegemonic masculinity, the thesis locates gender equality in power relations and institutional norms that define authority. Secondly, a key part of the question is nationalist contexts, and as demonstrated, nationalism is not gender neutral. The theories explain further the relationship between women and the roles that are assigned to them in the national order. Thirdly, by combining these theories, both masculinised state institutions and nationalist ideology are addressed, making it more powerful than looking at them through individual lenses.

3.1 Gendered Nationalism

Feminist theories of nationalism by Enloe (1989) and Yuval-Davis (1993, 2006) demonstrate how nations are constructed through gendered hierarchies, and that nations are not gender-neutral.

In her book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989) Cynthia Enloe was one of the first scholars to demonstrate how international politics is fundamentally shaped by gendered relationships and cannot be fully understood without investigating the lives of diverse women in spaces usually dismissed as "private," "local," or "trivial" (17). By always asking the question of "Where are the women?" Enloe aims to uncover how the global system relies on feminised labour and masculinised control. Ultimately, for international politics to function the way it does, both the presence and thereby the absence of women is key. Roles that initially appear peripheral are politically central, so nationalist projects are dependent on the normalisation of gendered roles. By playing these different roles, whether it is in tourism, teaching or military, women make the world work but can also remake it.

Moreover, Enloe argues that nationalism usually originates from "masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope" (Enloe 1989, 56). Within such a framework, women are not treated as genuine and active participants with their personal goals, but as symbols of the nation – be it as the "nation violated" or "the nation at its purest" (Enloe 1989, 52).

Building on this, Yuval-Davis in "Gender and Nation" (1993) and "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging" (2006) conceptualises women as biological, symbolic and cultural reproducers of the nation, highlighting the way that gendered regulations shape citizenship and belonging and aim to separate the population between "us" and "them" groups. She identifies the role of women as structured across three main dimensions, that explain how they are incorporated into the nation: in terms of citizenship (Staatnation), culture (Kulturnation) and origin or race (Volknation) (624). For the first dimension, the dualistic nature of women's citizenship is highlighted - on the one

hand, women are always included in the general body of citizens (to some extent), but on the other hand they are simultaneously subjected to more specific and often more restrictive legislation regarding their family roles and public sphere duties. Indeed, the very notion of citizenship is often a “fraternity of men” (625). Second, women act as so-called “symbolic border guards” and transmitters of cultural markers, for example traditions, customs, food, and the mother tongue (627). As such, women can become primary signifiers for the ethnic and cultural boundaries between “us” and “them” groups. Third, women can be seen as biological reproducers of national collectivity. Finally, it is crucial to recognize that women should not be viewed simply as passive victims and that they are not a homogeneous category (630). Indeed, these gendered policies are applied differently in different nationalist projects based on individual’s race, class and ethnicity.

Her other work “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging” (2006) distinguishes between belonging as the emotional feeling of being “at home” or “safe” and the politics of belonging which are specific political projects designed to construct and maintain what the boundaries of collectivity are (197, 204). She argues that belonging can be constructed in three different ways: through social and economic locations, such as gender, race and class which have particular implications in different historical moments; through identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199, 202, 203). She then connects these levels to citizenship, which acts as both a participatory practice and a legal status involving entitlements, like “spatial rights” (208). While her earlier work (1993) focused on how gender roles reproduce the nation, this article expands on the specific “dirty work of boundary maintenance” that defines who is granted the right to belong in an increasingly globalised world (Yuval-Davis 2006, 204).

Therefore, female executive leadership emerges within a symbolic order that already assigns gendered expectations to political authority. The ideas of Enloe and Yuval-Davis highlight a vision of the nation as a fundamentally gendered project that is sustained through the regulation of women’s symbolic roles.

3.2 Masculinised Executive Leadership

While gendered nationalism structures symbolic belonging, executive political leadership is shaped by masculinised norms of authority and can be seen as an extension of this gendered national project. Here, R. W. Connell’s concept (1995/2005) of hegemonic masculinity provides a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of masculinity and power relations that

define who can exercise authority and in what ways. Understanding and talking about masculinities is important, because it does not only address men but more specifically their position in society, and their relationship with femininities is therefore a part of this conversation, as women also play a role in forming them. She conceptualises masculinities not as fixed biological traits but as layers of practice that have become a part of everyday and institutional practices, through which gender is actively produced and reproduced further. Within this order, the concept of hegemonic masculinity represents one of the norms that culturally is placed over the other and it a strategy for maintaining the dominance of men and subordination of women. Importantly, it is not necessarily the most common pattern, but it is the one that is supported by institutional power in the government and military (Connell 2005, 77).

Masculinities are by nature relational and hierarchical, structured through various patterns of dominance, subordination, complicity, and marginalisation. The idea of the “patriarchal dividend” — what is explained as the collective advantages that stem from women’s subordination — also benefit men who do not fully embody hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005, 79). These dynamics are reproduced across institutions and passed on through generations, because both men and women alike are active agents in the “production” of masculinity with shared gender regimes, starting from schools and ending at political institutions.

Furthermore, Connell discusses executive leadership and defines it as a key site where hegemonic masculinity is constructed and maintained. Qualities typically associated with executive leadership include rationality, emotional control and isolation, authority, adaptability, and strategic power and reflect masculine-coded expectations of leadership. These norms are not neutral but are sustained through body-reflexive practices, in which social expectations are embodied in everyday behaviors, ranging from competitiveness to performance of authority (Connell 1995/2005, 64). As a result, women entering leadership positions face the additional challenge of navigating institutions already structured to prioritise masculine ideals. That is not to say that women do not assume any leadership positions; on the contrary, they increasingly do so, but it is within substantively masculinised institutions.

This dynamic is particularly visible in South Korea and Japan, both of which have undergone remarkable post-war economic developments. This “economic miracle” as it is commonly referred to was driven by a collectivist allegiance to the state.² At that time the hegemonic ideal, especially

² “Miracle on the Han River” in South Korea following the Korean War or the “Japanese Economic Miracle” in Japan, starting in the mid-1950s.

in Japan, became the “salaryman” representing the total loyalty of someone who is committed to lifelong work for a single firm (Andreeva 2019, 10; Connell 2000, 50). This model relied on strict division of labour, in which men occupied the public sphere while women managed the domestic front (Andreeva 2019, 10). Because leadership norms continue to reflect these expectations, namely long working hours, complete loyalty and informal networking practices such as alcohol, women are often excluded and viewed as “unfit” or as not as committed to high-level roles.

What is more, masculinities are not static; they are historically dynamic and respond to crisis tendencies (Connell 2005, 77). A key example is that of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which affected both societies and served as a major turning point (Andreeva 2019, 10). It caused a significant disruption to the traditional breadwinner model, making this secure and high-paying type of work unsustainable, thus exposing the fragility of hegemonic masculinity. As traditional masculine success became harder to achieve, this opened space for greater female participation in the labour market simply because they were forced to become more active and independent. At the same time, it generated resistance from men as they looked to protect their access to the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 2005, 79). This means that rather than transforming gender relations, such crises often result in some sort of reconfiguration rather than the complete disappearance of masculine dominance (Connell 2005, 84).

Connell’s framework also highlights that institutions themselves are substantively gendered. Authority, legitimacy, and leadership are defined through male-dominated norms that underpin the state and corporate institutions, making them operate as masculine institutions (Connell 2005, 75). This is clearly reflected in the reproduction of the “glass ceiling” and other persistent gender imbalances in political representation. Even in the cases when women gain access to leadership positions, certain structural mechanisms, such as the “motherhood penalty,” continue to limit their advancement. For example, in South Korea, the career pauses that women make in connection to family and childbirth are penalised within a system that rewards continuous employment, reinforcing the perception that women are not as suitable as men to perform leadership roles (Jennings 2019).

To further explain this persistence, Fiona Mackay’s (2014) concept of “nested newness” can be used to explain how these tend to be embedded in longstanding power hierarchies which prioritise masculine-coded norms. Nested newness is a feminist institutionalist concept, which describes how new political institutions are embedded in “time, sequence and its institutional environment”, thus no institution can be a “blank slate” (Mackay 2014, 552). As a result, “new politics” ends up

coexisting with “politics as usual” (Mackay 2014, 562). Breakthrough moments can therefore co-exist with structural continuity.

The persistence of gender inequality in political leadership is thus not simply a matter of representation but is rooted in the ongoing production of masculinised norms across institutions and generations.

3.3 Interaction

Individual obstacles and cultural attitudes by themselves are helpful to understand women’s underrepresentation, however, they do not fully explain this phenomenon. Instead, it is the mutually reinforcing structures of gendered nationalism and masculinised executive authority that come together to form a self-reinforcing system that promotes exclusion. Barriers, such as the glass ceiling are then more than administrative or organisational problems, but a systemic project or a social structure designed to sustain the nation-state and hegemonic masculinity over time. Women as symbols and reproducers of the nation as dictated by the ideological justification presented by gendered nationalism, and the institutional design, state policy and hierarchy provided by masculinised executive authority lay the groundwork for the analytical lens of this thesis.

4. Methodology.

This thesis proposes a comparative study of Park Geun-hye and Sanae Takaichi, focusing on the paradox that arises from their leadership. It is interdisciplinary, incorporating elements primarily from political science and international relations as its primary disciplinary lenses, with history as its secondary analytical support discipline, providing insights into the development of political and cultural institutions and gender norms in both countries. It also engages with gender studies, Asian studies, media and nationalism studies.

The selection of the two leaders is theoretically motivated rather than representative. Both leaders are hailed as political “firsts” in their countries, and they have both ascended to executive power within male-dominated, conservative political environments. Their cases challenge assumptions that women’s political advancement necessarily aligns with feminist agendas or progressive gender reform. Rather than simply evaluating them in terms of policy successes or failures, the study aims to uncover how female leadership is constituted, constrained and interpreted within gendered political institutions. Therefore, the main question is not whether they govern in a way that can be described as “good” but why the presence of women at the top of the political ladder is seen as a

symbolic breakthrough without pushing for substantive transformation in gender relations in their respective countries.

The thesis addresses a research gap: there is much academic literature on Park Geun-hye's presidency considering that her tenure ran 46 months between 2013 and 2017 (instead of the usual 60 months) (Hahm and Heo 2017). However, comparatively little has examined Takaichi in Japan because she assumed the post of prime minister only in October of 2025. Furthermore, there is no work juxtaposing the two leaders across several consistent analytical categories. By looking at the interplay of factors, such as gender, nationalism, conservatism, representation and institutional power, it aims to analyse the conditions under which women can gain political authority and the limits of that authority. More specifically, it seeks to examine why it is that women in conservative East Asian democracies and some of the most innovative ones, often achieve symbolic breakthroughs and smash the so-called "glass ceiling" but do not actually lead to meaningful substantive transformation. In doing so, it contributes insights to a growing body of scholarship concerning gender and Asian studies.

This thesis adopts a qualitative comparative research design, drawing on insights from the logic outlined by Ragin (1998) - as a "middle path" that combines the in-depth focus of qualitative case studies and the generalising strengths of quantitative research. This way, complex causal patterns can be discovered without losing the specificity of individual cases. The research employs a most similar systems design (MSSD). MSSD allows the researcher to choose systems that are as similar as possible, except when it comes to the phenomenon, the effects of which one is interested in discovering (Anckar 2008, 389). So, countries have high control variables and differ on one aspect, the independent variable under study. Japan and South Korea share many structural characteristics: they are rich and advanced economies in East Asia, share similar history, are shaped by Confucian-influenced gender norms, the political system is marked by conservative party dominance, and consistently rank in the second half for women's political representation relative to other OECD countries (World Economic Forum 2025). This allows for their comparison as broader structural conditions can remain relatively constant, while the differences can provide meaningful variation.

The categories for the analysis are derived directly from the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3, namely Connell's hegemonic masculinity, Yuval-Davis's gendered nationalism and Enloe's relationship between nationalism and women's roles. Together, they are designed to answer the research question systematically rather than just provide descriptive coverage. They are organised into two chapters — Chapter 6 focuses on executive masculinity and Chapter 7 on gendered

nationalism.

Chapter 6 puts into practice Connell's argument that hegemonic masculinity structures access to authority through male-dominated networks and masculine-coded norms. It is separated into two subsections: leadership and political capital, and party structure and institutional organisation. Presidential studies literature highlights that studying the personal background of leaders is necessary to understand their behaviour, leadership style and qualities and public response once in office (Goldfien, Joseph, and Krcmaric 2023). The personal leadership qualities and communication styles that leaders exhibit during their terms also highly affect their presidency. This category evaluates how a female leader manages the "double bind" dilemma of balancing agentic or masculine qualities, such as strength and decisiveness, with communal or feminine ones like warmth and empathy. It reveals whether a leader adheres to or challenges the masculine paradigm of national leadership. Its second category – institutional party and context – evaluates cabinet composition, party structure and representation mechanisms to assess whether the leadership generated any meaningful "trickle-down effect" for women.

Chapter 7 expands Yuval-Davis's argument that women function as symbolic reproducers of the nation and Enloe's that nationalist projects operate on normalising gendered roles. It is separated into policy orientation and gender advocacy to address the way women are addressed in each leader's legislative agenda, and nationalist positioning. The policy orientation and gender advocacy category captures the legislative priorities, as well as any gender-related policies by the respective leaders. Together, the four categories follow the logic of the framework, which moves from institutional and performative constraints of female leadership to symbolic and ideological ones, and the interaction between them is where the research question is located.

The study has several limitations. First, Park's presidency is complete, while Takaichi's tenure is still new and ongoing. As a result, the analysis of Takaichi's leadership regarding her policies is provisional and may not capture long-term developments or shifts in public opinion. Second, some speeches, documents and media coverage were accessed in Korean or Japanese and translated using online tools, such as Google Translate. While these translations generally allow for a good grasp of the contents, subtle linguistic nuances may exist. Relatedly, there were some difficulties with finding some primary sources for Park Geun-hye. Due to restructuring of the Blue House or the "Cheong Wa Dae" website after Park's impeachment, some of her statements to the nation are not centrally hosted anymore. Links to archived government PDFs and transcripts from reliable

media sources are provided instead. In contrast, all speeches, statement and meeting were easily accessible for the Japanese case through the Prime Minister's Office of Japan website, where there were language options for both Japanese and English. Finally, focusing on only two cases restricts generalization but allows for in-depth analysis and comparison along the pre-selected categories.

5. Context and Historical Background.

The analytical categories established in the methodology do not operate in a vacuum. Instead, it can be said that they are rather historically and context-dependent, as the structures that they describe are produced and reproduced over time through specific institutional, cultural, and political processes. To apply them meaningfully to South Korea and Japan, it is therefore important to understand the historical conditions through which these structures were formed. The background is established across three levels: gender equality frameworks, providing the international context; the broader regional patterns of women's political participation in Asia; and the specific political and cultural systems and gendered histories of both countries. This chapter demonstrates that the rise of Park and Takaichi is neither a product of modernisation nor an anomaly, but the outcome of various processes that have interacted with each other for decades. From then on, the analytical chapters examine these interactions at the level of executive leadership.

5.1 Global Gender Equality Frameworks

The first UN World Conference on the status of women took place in Mexico City in 1975, to highlight the fact that discrimination against women constitutes an ongoing problem in many parts of the world. This was the start of an era that was aimed at promoting the advancement of women and opening a dialogue on women equality. The Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year proclaimed that obstacles that prevent women from enjoying equal status with men must be eliminated, so that their full integration into national development is ensured. It also called for the allocation of necessary resources by the State to enable the participation of women in the political life of their countries and that their decision-making ability is a prerequisite for the development of national well-being (United Nations 1975, 4). This was an important step as it pushed member states to invest in development opportunities for women, including the capacitation of women on political matters.

Other UN resolutions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

against Women (Resolution 34/180), and the World Conferences in Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985, further compelled states to eliminate all forms of discrimination, importantly addressing the discrimination caused by cultural and religious beliefs visible in many countries. All these political agreements and legal advances led to the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which in many ways is seen as a milestone in increasing female participation across various fields, and is currently considered the main global gender equality policy document by the UN. The conference called for the full inclusion of women in all levels of power structures and decision-making, without which equality, development and peace goals cannot be achieved. It also identified actions that needed to be taken by governments, political parties, and civil society (United Nations 1995). Fundamentally, Beijing recognised the need for a reevaluation of the entire structure of society and its institutions, and a switch of focus from women to the concept of gender itself. By recognising this, it elevated women's rights to human rights and identified gender equality as an issue of universal concern that would benefit all (United Nations 1995).

Furthermore, Goal 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Among targets, such as ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women, and securing universal access to sexual and reproductive rights, ensuring the full and effective participation of women in all levels of political, economic and public life is highlighted as one of the key areas (United Nations 2025).

These international frameworks provide normative and institutional foundations, as well as principal areas for development; however, their implementation varies across regions. This global context sets the stage for examining how such frameworks interact with national political systems, particularly in Asia.

5.2 Gender and Political Development in Asia

Across the region, women's participation in politics was mostly shaped by moments of high institutional instability, kinship and marital ties and political transitions, rather than by gradual processes of democratization alone (Jalalzai 2004). Historically, women across all Asia gained political rights significantly later than their counterparts in Western democracies. Before the start of World War II only three Asian countries had granted female suffrage - Sri Lanka in 1931, Thailand in 1932 and Myanmar in 1935, when much of western Europe and the United States had already established it soon after World War I (Iwanaga 2008, 133). However, this timeline cannot be understood independently of colonial rule and state formation processes in Asia, as political reforms

were often shaped by imperial restructuring rather than solely as the result of domestic gender movements. Both Sri Lanka and Myanmar were under British colonial rule in the period when female suffrage was introduced.

By 2005, women held only 15.2% of parliamentary seats on average, placing the region behind Europe and the Americas (Iwanaga 2008, 25). A primary explanation for this is the fact that in many countries in Asia, politics is typically viewed as a “male realm” and stereotypes women as governed by their emotions, or too “morally innocent” for the perceived dishonest and dirty world of power, thus making them unfit for being political leaders (Iwanaga 2008, 13). This perception has led to the marginalization of women in politics, highlighting the patriarchal and paternalistic socio-cultural structures.

A notable feature of the region is that some of Asia’s poorer nations, such as Vietnam, Laos and Pakistan exhibit higher levels of female representation than affluent societies like Japan and South Korea, where women have been successful in educational institutions and professional occupations. This can be defined as something of a development paradox - while one might expect economic modernisation to naturally dismantle gender barriers, that is not the case. Due to gender quotas, reserved seats, track models, and state-led ideological commitments to gender equality, less developed states have achieved more success (Iwanaga 2008, 2).

Another significant factor in Asia is the role of dynastic politics, or the “appendage syndrome”, which can be described as a “side entrance” for women to step into higher levels of the political hierarchy (Iwanaga 2008, 36-37). This refers to the idea that many women who have served in important positions of power have gained them primarily because they are daughters of widows of former charismatic male leaders. Take for example, Corazon Aquino (Philippines), Wan Azizah (Malaysia), or Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), who have accessed power through familial ties. What is more, leaders like Aquino and Azizah leveraged a “victimisation sentiment” - a case where leaders use the sympathy from the public generated from the death or imprisonment of a male relative in politics to establish their legitimacy and gather support (Iwanaga 2008, 31-32). This is not to discredit the achievements of some of these leaders, who have been able to exercise their power independently from the men who preceded them, but more to situate them as “deviant cases” compared to the status of the general female population in the region ³ (Iwanaga 2008, 49). While

³ To name one example, the term of Corazon Aquino (1986-1992) saw the approval and adoption of the Philippine Development Plan for Women for 1992 (Executive Order 348) and the development of the 1987 Constitution, the supreme law of the Philippines, which remains unchanged to this day.

dynastic politics and institutional transitions provide an entry point to leadership, only rarely do they produce a trickle-down effect that benefits broader female representation (Iwanaga 2008, 41). Furthermore, dynastic descent often serves as a way to reinforce the name and power of the family, and not necessarily for advancing a broader gender-equality agenda (Iwanaga 2008, 271).

The dynastic logic is not limited to contemporary political systems but also has deeper historical precedents. Within this broader regional pattern, China presents an interesting case for understanding women's political participation in Asia. Imperial China had at least two female leaders — Empress Wu Zetian and the Empress Dowager Cixi — before any modern conception of democracy or women's rights (Ko 2025, 25). Empress Wu Zetian ruled for 45 years, which is a remarkably long period for any leader, without “invoking the wrath of the patriarchy” (Ko 2025, 26). Similarly, the Empress Dowager Cixi exercised authority in a society where women faced physical restrictions, such as bound feet. Key takeaways from these examples are that the presence of female leaders does not necessarily correlate with the state of gender equality for the general population and that the Empresses demonstrate that women can lead and maintain power within unequal societies. They also suggest that female political advancement in Asia is not one linear progress towards feminism, but a recurring phenomenon where exceptional women exercise agency and authority to preserve the power of the state or of their own dynasties.

5.3 Political Systems and Agency of Women in Japan and South Korea

Comparatively, Japan and South Korea exhibit several overarching trends - conservative party dominance, low female representation in higher political positions and hierarchical, male-centered political cultures. Additionally, both societies are influenced by Confucian and patriarchal norms that shape gendered expectations of leadership, citizenship, and political behavior, yet each exhibit unique dynamics in terms of electoral systems, party politics, and gender representation.

5.3.1 Confucian Legacies

The influence of Confucianism in Japan and South Korea ought to be explained in further detail, as it has impacted gendered factors and the general acceptance of a male-dominated society, albeit with different levels of societal and political resistance (Andreeva 2019, 9). Despite rapid modernisation and democratisation in both countries, traces of Confucian values can still be found, as it has historically served as the foundation for a rigid social hierarchy that emphasizes familial duty, filial piety and distinct gender roles. This philosophical system emerged in ancient China,

where external factors came together to shape women into ‘women’. There as known as the “three obediences”, which dictated that a woman must be submissive to her father, then her husband, and finally her son (Cheng 2024, 37). Traditionally, it operated under the principle that "men lead outside, women lead inside", effectively confining women to the domestic sphere while men dominated public and political life (Cheng 2024, 37).

Confucianism in Japan should not be understood entirely in its pure form, but as inspired by Shintoism, creating a “shintonized” version of the philosophy, that promoted a gender-servility morality (Svyatnenko 2017, 32). This culture viewed women as objects meant to serve masculine-centric hierarchies and perform roles focused on child-rearing and household management. Historically, Japan was a matriarchal society until the reception of Confucian ideas from China, which shifted the structure toward a patriarchal system where men occupied dominant roles. Furthermore, the role of the emperor is fundamental here, as he is historically viewed as the spiritual leader of the nation and a divine authority (Zhong 2024, 1). Traditionally, the emperor was considered a “manifest god”, which some scholars say was not truly renounced by the 1946 “humanity declaration” (Zhong 2024, 7). The main point here is that despite his legal status as a human symbol, the emperor remains a divine, which status has historically justified the subordination of women within the state and the family (Zhong 2024, 3). In the modern era, Japanese gender roles have become an "eclectic mix" of traditional, male-dominated stereotypes and Western influences (Svyatnenko 2017, 35). Persistent stereotypes include the belief that men should work outside the home while women are better suited for domestic duties. Interestingly, modern Japanese cultural expressions, such as anime, often reflect these contradictions through the concepts of "Tatemae" (public face) and "Honne" (true feelings), where traditional gender expectations (Tatemae) coexist with contemporary realities of women pursuing careers (Honne) (Svyatnenko 2017, 35).

The political culture of South Korea is based on Confucianism, which values hierarchy (Hahm and Heo 2017, 657). As a result, gender disparities remain prevalent in political and economic life, although they have decreased in education and healthcare. Generally, Confucianism laid the grounds for patriarchal structures and subordination of women as serving to male-centered hierarchies. In Korea, the switch between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism is when the ideologies and institutional devices that imposed on the patriarchal social order were expanded in multiple ways (Kartova 2024, 9). Virtues of subordination and endurance were emphasized to prepare women for their roles as wives and mothers (Kim 2023, 2). During the Japanese colonial period, Korean women were expected to elevate their husbands' status while remaining in complete subservience. The “comfort women” system of World War II is one of the most extreme reflections

of this patriarchal and repressive order.⁴ Modern political milestones, namely the election of Park Geun-hye as the first female president, came at a time when the country was ranked in the bottom half for gender equality. Her presidency was shaped by events, which did not demonstrate an improvement for gender inequality, and her eventual impeachment reinforced the traditional belief that women are “unfit” for high power (Kim 2023, 3). The country continues to struggle with such legacies, evidenced by the highest gender wage gap in the OECD and persistent societal expectations of the “good wife and wise mother” (Kim 2023, 9).

Still, not to completely discredit the successes of contemporary Korean gender equality initiatives. South Korea has achieved good results through institutional reforms, beginning with the 1995 “Women’s Development Act” and the “Plans to Enhance Women’s Representation in the Public Sector”, which have led to measurable gains in the public sector, where female representation on government committees rose to 43% (Kim 2023, 4-5). Economically, the state supports women’s professional longevity through vocational training at Re-employment Centers and targeted aid like the 'Job Stabilization Fund', which protected nearly 60% of small businesses operated by women during the pandemic (Kim 2023, 5). Additionally, dedicated government initiatives have resulted in reductions in domestic violence and the creation of support centers to combat digital sexual crimes. Finally, the peaceful civic engagement surrounding the nation's political shifts is evidence of a maturing democracy and a high level of public engagement in democratic values through non-violent protests.

Interesting to mention also is the case of Taiwan, which similarly to Korea has Confucian heritage that traditionally marginalized women. Nevertheless, Taiwan has achieved more significant institutional and political advancements, due to its proactive use of gender quotas and educational reforms. In terms of political representation, Taiwan has largely outpaced South Korea; as of 2020, women held approximately 38% of legislative seats in Taiwan, whereas they held only 17.8% in South Korea’s National Assembly (Kim 2023, 7). In Taiwan, the move toward democratization and "Taiwanization" helped shift authority toward more inclusive gender policies, creating an environment where discussions on equality could flourish more freely than in South Korea’s still deeply traditionalist societal framework (Kim 2023, 4). This contrast highlights the importance of political and institutional factors in shaping gender outcomes and suggests that cultural explana-

⁴ The term “comfort women” refers to the predominantly Korean, but also Dutch, Filipino, Indonesian and Chinese women who were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. The euphemistic term itself and the systematic nature of abuse still remain a source of tension between Japan and South Korea.

tions alone are insufficient. The primary failures in South Korea stem from weak policy enforcement, persistent cultural biases, and recent institutional rollbacks that contrast sharply with Taiwan's approach. Weak penalties can, for example, be seen through the 'Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act' in 2019. In countries like the U.S. or Taiwan, violations can lead to severe monetary fines. South Korean companies, however, often only face public disclosure of their name, an incentive many businesses find weak compared to potential tax breaks (Kim 2023, 4-5).

5.3.2 Women's Agency in South Korea and Japan

Women's political agency in South Korea and Japan has developed in different ways, primarily defined by their relationship to nationalism and the state. A deeper look into the political and cultural systems of both countries helps situate the rise of female leaders like Park Geun-hye and Sanae Takaichi.

In South Korea, the conservative bloc, historically represented by the Grand National Party (later Saenuri Party, Liberty Korea Party and now People Power Party) has emphasized a hierarchical and closed form of leadership and strong executive authority. The South Korean political system remains a difficult environment for women as it is marked by dynastic and regional influences, intra-party factionalism and personal loyalties. Overall, party politics in the country are characterised by deep ideological and gender-based polarisation, a lack of institutional maturity, and a persistent culture of male dominance (Hahm and Heo 2017; Lee 2022).

Despite these structural barriers, women in South Korea have developed political agency through what can be characterised as “feminist nationalism”, meaning that the relationship between feminism and nationalism is mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional (Kim 2009, 109). Starting with the *Minjung* Movement during the struggle for democratisation in the 1980s, where women's agency emerged through the identity of the oppressed class, specifically female factory workers. Activists argued that liberating these women required challenging the “structural conditions” in Korean society, namely the military dictatorship and neocolonial influence at the time (Kim 2009, 113). This framing allowed women's labour activism to be embedded within wider political resistance movements.

South Korean women have also exercised agency in overturning patriarchal legal structures and contributing to large-scale transformations. A key example is the abolition of the family-led system — *hoju* — in 2005, which institutionalised patriarchal authority over the family. In this scenario, they strategically used nationalism to argue that the system was a Japanese colonial imposition, thereby transforming what could have been seen as purely a gender reform issue into a matter of national historical pride (Kim 2009, 116). Over time, Korean agency has shifted from a collective and unitary identity towards transversal politics, which recognises the diverse values and identities of women, including irregular workers, disabled women, migrants and more, moving beyond a simple women in general category (Hur 2011, 194, 198). Korean activism has also included the institutionalization of gender equality through legislative reforms like the Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Prevention of Family Violence Act, a political transformation on a macro level (Hur 2011, 189). The historical issue over the interpretation of the “comfort women” remains a central one, as Korean activists frame it not only as a universal wartime sexual violence issue but also nationalistic one, used to demand official apologies and compensation from Japan (Kim 2009, 115). Overall, South Korean’s women’s movements have evolved into central actors within civil society through characteristics like diversity and institutionalisation and have contributed massively to legal reforms and expansion of gender equality.

In Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has virtually dominated Japanese politics since its establishment in 1955, with its entrenched conservative and nationalist ideologies and factionalised internal party politics (Koichi 2016, 2). Since the 1990s, Japanese conservative nationalism has picked up momentum, shifting away from the postwar consensus of constitutional pacifism and historical restraint (Zhong 2024). This resurgence can be seen through some conservative organisations, political elites and cultural actors who work towards a reframing of Japan’s national identity. Central to this revival is the emergence of powerful ultraconservative and ultranationalist groups that have successfully translated ideological commitments into tangible political influence. A key example is Nippon Kaigi, which was formed in 1997. One of the main goals of this organization is revision of the Japanese Constitution, most prominently Article 9 or the “No War” clause established immediately after World War II, but also seven other important revisions, such as a new clause of emergency powers (Yoshifumi 2017, 15). In addition to pushing for constitutional revision, the group also promotes patriotic education, denies the reality of the comfort women issue and downplays the atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army in the Nanjing Massacre of 1937. These positions form part of a broader attempt to rehabilitate Japan’s imperial past and recast it as a source of national pride rather than historical shame.

Öberg and Hagström (2022) note that female nationalist agency in Japan is heterogenous and multifaceted and it carves out a distinct space for women by blending traditional domestic ethics with modern, performative activism. The type of activism draws from the traditional Japanese “housewife” identity ⁵ using it as a strategic way to “wake up” the public from “masochistic” historical narratives through mundane micro-practices, such as selling nationalist merchandise or community events, rather than large-scale political resistance (Öberg and Hagström 2022, 198, 204). The housewife identity is seen as “honest” and “dependable” and because she is a “born caretaker” she possesses the authority to speak on how society is failing to care for the nation (Öberg and Hagström 2022, 197). Because of this positioning, female nationalists are better suited to address the “information war” surrounding Japan’s past, especially the wartime atrocities. Their denial of wartime atrocities is viewed by the domestic public as less biased by gender and softer than their male counterparts, as they are regarded as “truth-tellers”.

Relatedly, Suzuki (2019) argues that Japanese revisionists perceive South Korea as a more potent threat than China or North Korea, due to the concept of ontological security or simply put the “the security of being” (303). The main goal of these revisionists is to secure Japan’s identity as an autonomous and peaceful state and as a legitimate member of the international democratic community. While China or North Korea’s criticisms can be dismissed due to their authoritarian nature, South Korea, as a fellow democratic state, makes criticisms regarding colonial and wartime actions difficult for Japan to ignore or dismiss internationally. As a result, there is a “war without weapons” in which Japan must defend its reputation, autonomy and interpretation of the past (Suzuki 2019, 314). Debates like these have contributed to the rise of revisionist and nationalist discourses that continue to shape contemporary Japanese politics. Overall, women's agency and its relationship to nationalism are primarily defined by right-wing revisionist activism, where women utilise their identities to protect the state’s historical "honour" rather than to expand feminist rights.

6. Executive Masculinity

6.1 Leadership and Political Capital

6.1.1 South Korea

South Korean political parties are marked by regionalism, personality-driven party politics and factionalism (Shin 2020, 157). In such a system, personal background, family ties and connections,

⁵ Most Japanese women are a part of the workforce now, but this identity is still important in Japanese society.

and informal networks and alliances become central sources of political capital. The rise of Park Geun-hye must be understood within the broader institutional and historical context of South Korea's political system and can also be described as what the literature identifies as a "side entrance" to power, in which case dynastic descent allows women to bypass entrenched patriarchal barriers (Iwanaga 2008).

Park Geun-hye is the daughter of Park Chung-hee, a former authoritarian president, who despite his undemocratic rule and declaration of martial law, remains one of the most influential and respected Korean leaders. This is because his time in office led to the rapid economic success and complete transformation of the war-torn country, commonly referred to as the "Miracle on the Han River". His rule remains deeply embedded in many citizens' political consciousness, especially among older generations, and for many his leadership is associated with stability and national progress (Hahm and Heo 2018). It is this positive legacy that became a crucial political resource for Park Geun-hye. Literature shows that in periods of economic and social uncertainty people look for a great leader who can lift them up (Hahm and Heo 2018). When the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis hit South Korea, it created that opening, as it caused severe economic difficulties, which led to an increased public nostalgia for a strong and steady presidential leadership, one reminiscing Park Chung-hee. At this time, the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) strategically recruited Park Geun-hye and capitalised on this widespread nostalgia. Her re-entry into politics and broader political identity were thus constructed as a continuation of a familiar and trusted political legacy, rather than as an individual departure from the past, something which can be seen in many cases in Asian female leadership (Andreeva 2019, 11). This illustrates that dynastic ties can leverage a kind of moral capital by allowing female leaders to gain both legitimacy and public support in contexts for which they usually would not be considered fit.

What also reinforced Park's identity was her political socialisation from early on in life. Following the assassination of her mother, Yook Young-Soo in 1974, Park was effectively serving as an Acting First Lady by giving speeches, receiving foreign leaders, engaging in diplomatic functions, and overall observing the inner workings of executive power (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 600). Being raised in the Blue House as a "royal family member" gave her informal but highly significant political experience that she was later able to market as preparedness in her presidential campaign. Five years later, her father was also assassinated by a close aide, after which she entered a period of seclusion for 18 years. In her memoir *Despair Strengthens me and Hope Moves Me*, she talks about this as a time marked by "betrayal trauma", as many people close to her father and the entire

family turned their backs on her during this period. Her unique personal background catalysed empathy, especially among those from her hometown, which turned into an important political asset (Shin 2020, 165).⁶ In this case, her gender actually proved helpful to appeal to male voters, given the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of women as caregivers and nurturers, helping her to differentiate herself from the rather controversial rule of her father's regime (Ko 2025, 7). These stereotypes aided her in creating a softer image of both the legacy of her father and her own. When she came back into politics nearly two decades later, she was able to combine her personal experience and people's desire to go back to the "good ol' days of economic prosperity" during the reign of Park Chung-hee. She then went on to serve five terms as a national legislator at the GNP until she eventually ran for president in 2012 (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 600).

While Park's political capital, primarily driven from the nostalgia for her father's era of rapid economic development, and unique personal background of tragedy and introduction to internal politics from a young age, enabled her to achieve a historic first for South Korea, they also exposed significant structural vulnerabilities. Her background provided both symbolic legitimacy and practical political experience, both of which were emphasised in her campaign, providing her with a strong base of political support and resources. At the same time, this connection meant that her political identity remained inextricably linked to her father's legacy as she was seen as his proxy and expected to carry on his legacy, limiting the extent to which she could create her own independent political persona.

Park's dynastic legitimacy was also successfully used in framing the public discourse surrounding her destiny to be the president of the country. She was oftentimes portrayed as a "filial daughter" due to her proximity to power from her early days, a framing that aligns with Yuval-Davis's argument that women function as symbolic carriers of national continuity within the politics of belonging, and even a "pitiful princess" which reflected her emotional narrative of personal loss following the assassination of both her parents, eliciting deep sympathy from the population. This was especially true for the older, more conservative part, which was nostalgic for her father's era of unprecedented growth (Shin 2018, 72, 78). This combination led to her successful election; however, it also reinforced the "appendage syndrome" whereby her political authority was perceived as derivative rather than fully autonomous. As a result, it also contributed to perceptions that her leadership lacked independence, which can be seen during moments of crisis. Her reliance on her

⁶ Daegu, in the North Gyeongsang Province, was her hometown and home base of her father.

father's legacy can further be understood through Yuval-Davis' framing of women as symbols of the nation and carriers of national continuity, and through Enloe's description of "masculinized memory" where male historical figures are the ones who construct national identity. Seen through these lenses, Park was not so much an independent political actor as more a symbolic extension of her father's legacy.

As previously noted, factionalism plays a big part within the South Korean party system, and further shaped Park's political capital. Parties in the country are often described as under-institutionalised and structured around personal loyalty towards dominant figures, rather than ideological coherence (Shin 2020). Within this environment, she created and maintained a strong "Park faction", characterised by strong internal discipline, top-down control and loyalty (Hahn and Heo 2018). This faction often engaged in intense rivalry with the pro-Lee Myung-bak faction, who was running for president opposite her (Lee and Shin 2016, 355-356). Additionally, her faction clearly reflected closed royalty and traditional ties instead of transparent institutional processes, highlighted by the fact that unqualified persons were elevated to high positions solely based on past personal connections (Hahn and Heo 2018, 653). Nevertheless, her ability to effectively mobilise her faction during electoral periods earned her the nickname "Queen of Elections", which significantly increased her political capital and attested to her success as a campaign leader (Hahn and Heo 2018, 656).

Her reliance on informal networks and personal relationships led to suspicions of cronyism, which became a central weakness of her presidency. This was also cited as a primary cause for the government's ineffective response to national crises. Most controversially, this is reflected in the "Choi Soon-sil gate" scandal, during which it was revealed that Choi, the daughter of her long-time mentor, was illegally involved in policy making decisions. This ultimately led to Park's impeachment in 2017. This episode demonstrates the risks associated with a political system in which informal networks operate alongside and sometimes override formal institutional mechanisms, a phenomenon that is nothing new in South Korea (Shin 2020). It also underscored the limitations of dynastic political capital: while it can facilitate access to power and grant popular support, it does not necessarily provide the institutional support or accountability mechanisms required for effective governance. Therefore, family ties and connections represent a necessary condition for her ascendance to political power but are also insufficient in completely explaining it (Mun 2015, 254).

Although Park's family background made her entry into politics possible, there were still challenges which she needed to overcome in order to expand her voter base and win the presidential election. While she gained a lot of support due to her father's rule, many opponents doubted her competence as a leader. Her communication style, decision-making, crisis management and rhetorical strategy reveal how executive authority was exercised in practice. Her construction of gender identity as both the "historically first" female president and as a "filial daughter" to an admired national leader worked together to secure her position within a highly gendered and centralised political system (Shin 2018, 72-73). This dual construction can be understood through the theoretical framework. Park's legitimacy was partly produced through her positioning within narratives of belonging rather than through purely institutional authority. She strategically drew on her physical resemblance to her mother to cultivate a more "communal" and softer image to help mitigate her top-down communication style and assertive leadership (Lee 2017, 386), which reflects Enloe's argument that women in nationalist contexts are often mobilised through feminised symbolism to stabilise masculinised structures of power. Simultaneously, she leveraged her father's authoritarian legacy to establish militarised masculinity in the national security arena, meaning that partly she drew legitimacy and authority from a male historical figure.

When it comes to Park's communication style, there is consensus that she was not effective as a public communicator. Interestingly, the importance of trust and communication with the citizens had been emphasised by the President in her inaugural address ("earn the trust of the people by ensuring that my Administration remains clean, transparent and competent"), however later on her style was in complete contrast, as she largely avoided direct engagement with the press and public (The Korea Herald 2013; Mun 2015, 264-265). In fact, she was widely criticised, and became associated with the nickname "bool-tong", from Korean meaning lack of communication (Hahm and Heo 2018, 652). This term captured both her infrequent public conferences and restricted interaction with other political actors. She was the first president who did not hold a single press conference in her first year and during her entire presidency she only released five formal, televised "statements to the nation", those being: an address regarding the Sewol Ferry Disaster in May 2014, a North Korea nuclear test address in 2016, and three formal statements during the 2016 political scandal under the form of two apologies and the final resignation offer. For instance, her first national apology lasted only 1 minute and 49 seconds, cementing her "bool-tong" style, and was criticised for being "emotionless" and "perfunctory" (Liu 2019, 512-513). In contrast, in her second speech, which was over 9 minutes, she took a more emotional approach, trying to earn the sympathy of the nation through tears, and utilise communal and maternal rhetoric, with the

goal of improving her approval rate (Liu 2019, 514). The careful use of rhetoric can function as a gendered resource through which leaders attempt to produce legitimacy via care and sacrifice, aiming to place her both as morally accountable to the family of the nation, and as more emotionally accessible. In addition, given that she had portrayed her presidency as a “marriage to the country”, abandoning it would have been the worst choice. These were clearly unsuccessful in satisfying the public, as they were seen as mirroring the government’s inadequate response to the Sewol ferry crisis (to be discussed later in this section).

The number of official public appearances is strikingly low compared to her predecessors and opponents, who more frequently addressed the nation on political and economic issues as a tool for persuasion and consensus-building. She eschewed public statements and deliberation, did not signal her policy intentions, and demanded complete loyalty from her closest advisors (Hahm and Heo 2018). This approach created an environment described as hierarchical and closed and limited her ability to respond dynamically to public concerns. Due to limited engagement with the public, her ability to fully showcase her experience and skills was weakened, which in turn contributed to perceptions of inaccessibility and opacity.

Similarly, her decision-making style was also highly centralised and hierarchical, marked by top-down control and secrecy (Hahm and Heo 2018, 654). Moreover, her leadership had often been referred to as “sesame seed leadership”, which meant she would give meticulous and detailed instructions, nitpicking on small policy details (Mun 2015, 265). While her attention to last minute-details — such as the price of schoolbooks, for example — was described by the media as being “typical of her female leadership style” (Mun 2015, 265), through Connell’s framework it can instead be understood as a strategy to command authority within the most masculine political institution, namely the state. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity is especially useful here because it conceptualises authority not simply as male dominance but as a set of institutionalised practices that emphasise assertiveness, control and emotional distance. Through her meticulousness and rigorousness, she sought to overcome the “double bind” of female leadership, where women are often viewed as less competent than their male counterparts. This way she could project the image of being “well-prepared president” and a commander-in-chief, distancing herself from the female softness and aligning more closely with agentic qualities, associated with masculine leadership. At the same time, however, she also maintained a softer public image through maternal and communal symbolism. One of the days through which she achieved that was through her physical resemblance to her late mother.

Cabinet members appointed by her were oftentimes seen taking notes while she was speaking, creating the image of a tightly controlled executive structure in which key decisions were made by her closest confidants and in a narrow circle rather than within a collaborative governance. This approach reduced their function to something resembling administrative staff that does not actively contribute to policy formation, as she had the tendency to not share political power with her cabinet (Mun 2015, 265). This reflects a broader pattern within South Korean presidentialism, which grants the executive significant formal power. However, Park's tendency elevated this by largely limiting internal debate and discouraging dissent. Because of the shift away of power from ministers towards a more secretive inner circle, top political leadership was reinstated as a masculine terrain of personal rule, suggesting that her meticulousness was not another "female leadership style" but a tool to navigate and sustain a patriarchal state structure.

Two episodes most severely tested Park's leadership, where the limitations of her closed-off communication style and authoritative decision-making became evident. The sinking of the MV Sewol in April 2014 that led to the death of 304 people, 250 of which were high school students, was the first of these events as it marked a critical turning point in public perceptions of her presidency (Park 2024). The government's response was criticised for delays, lack of coordination, suppression of criticism, and insufficient transparency. The address to the nation held on May 19, about a month after the incident took place, did not satisfy the public, as the delayed response was seen as an absence of leadership and an attempt to downplay culpability of the government. She formally accepts accountability ("As the President responsible for lives and safety of the people"), but then immediately shifts focus to the Korea Coast Guard, Ministry of Security and Public Administration and other institutions (Park 2014). Rather than portraying decisive crisis leadership, her response reframes the disaster as the culmination of systemic governance failure. There are instances of grief ("sleepless nights in agony"), but they are brief and contained, quickly followed by policy restructuring and legal proposals (Park 2014). In crisis of such magnitude, leadership is elevated on its symbolic presence like empathy, visibility and reassurance, as much as its outcome. Park's failure to meet these expectations continued to a rapid decline in public trust. She was criticised both for not displaying decisive leadership and for failing to show the level of empathy expected of a female leader in the aftermath of a disaster.

Similarly, the handling of the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015, worsened the situation. The government was criticised for its inadequate response and withholding of information, which heightened public anxiety and distrust towards the official responses. Once

again, Park's limited engagement and reliance on controlled communication channels hindered effective crisis management. These two episodes, combined with worsening socioeconomic conditions, such as youth unemployment and increasing inequality, all contributed to a more widespread frustration with Park's leadership (Shin 2020, 171). Moreover, in the context of gendered expectations, these failures were amplified by the perception that Park did not display the empathy or responsiveness expected of a female leader.

At the same time, her campaign made use of images of her visiting the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the border barrier splitting the peninsula into two. She was pictures looking at North Korea with binoculars and dressed in a military uniform, a move intended to establish her credentials as a tough commander-in-chief that is aware of the importance of national security, traditionally a highly masculinised political arena (Lee 2017, 384). This was further reinforced in a speech from 2016, where she addressed the nuclear tests carried out by North Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). Overall, the matter of North Korea's proximity and ever-present threat made the presidency all the more masculine, but in her dealing with it Park did not show sympathy or sensitivity (Mun 2015, 266).

These dynamics came to their highest point during the 2016 political scandal and subsequent impeachment. While the crisis centered on abuse of power and corruption, the rhetoric around it was gendered. Adjectives like "puppet", "robot", and "doll" were used to criticise her lack of agency and incompetence and suggest that she was a sheltered "hothouse flower" controlled by outside influences and secretive circles (Lee 2023, 772, 769).

Despite her communicative flaws and significant challenges with crisis management, she was also known for her political agility during election cycles, successfully leading her party through multiple scandals and exhibiting a calculated use of political messaging. An example of that is a 2006 incident, when a man attacked her with a knife while she was participating in the mayoral election in Seoul. Television news repeatedly showed the attack and displayed Park looking straight at her attacker and remaining calm. As a response, her party gained even more support, and she was able to use this as a narrative later on in her career. She gained the nickname "queen of election" and "party savior", and this pushed forward the idea that she could keep a clear head in crisis and manage her emotions (Lee 2017, 383). Furthermore, in her first TV campaign advertisement in 2012, she framed herself as "a healer of broken hearts", referencing the narrative of her survival of the knife attack as a way to demonstrate her dedication to the nation and present herself as a selfless woman president (Lee 2017, 383-384). On another occasion, she framed her focus on welfare and national integration as "the heart of a mother who does not let her ten children go

hungry” (Lee 2013, 65). Nevertheless, this rhetoric often masked a stance advocating more for “state patriarchy” than anything else.

6.1.2 Japan

Unlike many prominent female politicians in Asia who have ascended to power through dynastic lineage or connections, Sanae Takaichi illustrates a different case, as she possesses no kinship ties to established political elites in Japan. She was born in Nara Prefecture to a father working in the automotive industry and a mother who served in the Nara Prefectural Police, meaning that she comes from a non-elite background. Instead, her political capital stems from institutional immersion and 33-year long-term dedication to the LDP, beginning with her entry into parliament in 1993 and followed by a gradual climb through the party’s structures. Since then, she has held key portfolios, including as Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications under Shinzo Abe and Minister for Economic Security under Fumio Kishida, to name some, which have established her as one of the most experienced figures in the LDP. Eventually, she was elected as the country’s first female Prime Minister in October 2025, putting her in the highest executive position in Japan (King 2025). Her status was also cemented in the snap elections in February 2026, when she won 316 out of 465 seats, marking an increase with 118 pre-election seats. This was also the first time in Japan’s post-war history that a single party has won supermajority (Ward 2026). This supermajority was driven by Japan’s political shift toward the right and reflects the move away from the pacifist-leaning opposition to a more hardline stance.

Institutional progression is, however, not the sole reason for Takaichi’s political capital. While her entry in politics was not facilitated by a sudden death and nostalgic capital like Park’s, her legitimacy was in big part dependent on her status as a protégé and close political ally of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Abe was president of the LDP and the longest-serving PM of Japan, until his assassination in 2022. He was a highly influential, yet controversial figure, due to his conservative and ultranationalist stance, hawkish foreign policy and a set of economic packages known as “Abenomics” (Kato and Jalil 2022). Abe and Takaichi’s close relationship is important to understanding her position within the LDP factional politics. In this case, it is not familial lineage, but something closer to ideological inheritance and mentorship through Abe, which worked in her favour, as his authority transferred on to her as an Abe “disciple (Ko 2025, 21). Read through the framework, this transfer of authority means that legitimacy is not self-generated but flows through male-dominated networks. His legacy centres on constitutional revisionism, high military budget, strengthened security standing and boosted national pride, and Takaichi has embraced a lot of his

policies so far (York and Glosserman 2025). Her alignment with this worldview positions her as a continuity figure within the LDP's conservative bloc.

At the same time, Takaichi's rise can be explained through a broader dynastic framework, namely the "political dynasty" that stems from the existence of the LDP itself (Ko 2025, 19). Due to the party's nearly uninterrupted dominance of Japanese politics since 1955, it has earned voters' support and trust and is often seen as a type of royal family or a long-standing dynasty. Thus, leadership is essentially reserved for long-term party members, making the LDP resemble a "family" of insiders (Ko 2025, 19). Adding on to this, the analogy of LDP as a dynasty is reinforced by the literal dynastic tendencies within Japanese politics. For instance, around 40% of the LDP's lawmakers have directly inherited their seats from family members, thereby automatically getting higher and better-organised levels of support due to familiarity (Engman 2023, 5). From this perspective, Takaichi did not need literal family ties to benefit from dynastic-style connections. Instead, her long-term institutional embeddedness within the LDP "family", as demonstrated by her portfolio and emphasised in her campaign, granted her authority comparable to hereditary political elites in other parts of Asia (Ko 2025, 19-20). The competitive process of successors having to be "anointed" by current leaders reflects a structure of hegemonic masculinity within the party, as executive legitimacy is mediated through male-dominated elite networks and factional sponsorship (Ko 2025, 20).

This longstanding position among the LDP and the strong connection to Abe granted her the legitimacy to enter the powerful right-wing factions within the party and move beyond its usual tactic of "decorating with flowers", used by Abe during his tenure to appoint women to posts for symbolic purposes, without giving them substantive power (Andreeva 2019, 11). By carrying the "Abe-ism" mantle, adopting his security-first orientation and prioritising domains like security and intelligence, naturally coded as hard or masculine, Takaichi performs political masculinity in a way that allows her to be recognised as legitimate within the elite party hierarchies, that would be otherwise difficult for women to enter and stay for long periods of time.

Her ideological capital and powerful network are further strengthened by her affiliation with the *Nippon Kaigi*, the ultraconservative and ultranationalist far-right group that seeks to reframe Japanese wartime history and restore national pride (Koichi 2016). By aligning herself with these views, her appeal to the LDP's conservative base becomes much stronger, and she is seen as an ideologically reliable leader. The LDP and "big politics" in general in Japan are usually described

as a “male preserve” where women represent less than 20% of legislative seats (Andreeva 2019, 11). Her involvement in circles like the *Nippon Kaigi* provides her with legitimacy needed to command authority over male-dominated sectors. By positioning herself as the most assertive, security-conscious voice in these networks, Takaichi has successfully substituted familiar moral capital with ideological purity to secure her position in domestic politics. Furthermore, the LDP’s “Coalition Agreement” with the Japan Innovation Party (JIP) which is centered around a “realism-based view of international politics and national security” with the slogan “independent nation” has also bolstered her leadership and aligns with her conservative stance (Tamaoki 2025, 1).

Combining these elements, one can see how Takaichi’s political capital is not only a result of long-term participation and individual ambition. It is also an outcome of Abe’s ideological mentorship and nationalist factional networks. Her rise to power demonstrates how female executive leadership within patriarchal systems is often achieved through the strategic embrace and reinforcement of masculine structures. From a theoretical perspective, the idea of hegemonic masculinity in institutional power is visible as political legitimacy is structured through the alignment with dominant masculine-coded authority systems. Takaichi’s positioning with and continuation of Abe’s ideologies and views allows her to leverage this ideological proximity and transform it to political capital and support, thereby compensating for structural gender exclusion and systemic underrepresentation within leadership and policy-making positions in Japan (Asao, Khera, and Vasisht 2024).

Takaichi’s communication style is crucial to the construction of her political legitimacy and executive authority. Japanese politics remains a deeply masculinised terrain due to cultural norms as seen by the low percentage of women in national and local parliaments, therefore rhetorical performance and style of leadership, including decision-making and crisis-management, are not merely stylistic but a continuation of political credibility itself. It also reflects Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity within executive leadership. Japan’s executive office has historically been male-dominated, and reflects what can be described as the “iron law of politics” where the higher level of executive authority is, the lower is the number of women who occupy these positions; the same goes for the desirability of an office (Iwanaga 2008, 103). Within this setting, Takaichi navigates the space by adopting an agentic and decisive communication style, something that the media has frequently termed “Iron Lady” to reflect her assertiveness and command orientation. Rather than adopting a more maternal political rhetoric, her leadership is heavily focused

on security and national issues, directly reflecting the requirement of political leaders to “act successfully as men” within masculinised structures of power, the office of the Prime Minister occupying the highest domains. A closer look at her policy rhetoric helps to make this idea more visible.

To begin with, in her official 2025 platform the emphasis on a “strong economy”, growth, and the securitised framing of political issues is clear. She states that one of her main goals is to “protect Japan’s peace by strengthening its defense capabilities and diplomatic capabilities” and further that “we will build a national defense system that can respond to new forms of warfare (space, cyber, electromagnetic domains, drones, hypersonic weapons)” (Takaichi 2025). The recurring framing of governance through the language of permanent crisis and danger from all sides is a defining characteristic of Takaichi’s communication style. Foreign threats, security alliances, the improvement of defense equipment, and the rebuilding of the economy are reiterated as national emergencies that require strong executive intervention. There is an emphasis on “crisis-management investments and growth investments” which is of significance because it merges economic governance and national defence into one singular framework instead of separating them. In general, there is a pattern of broader securitisation and turn away from the pacifist constitution of Japan, where economic management and technological development are increasingly articulated through the perception of geopolitical threat and strategic competition. These phrases of protecting peace in the country, strengthening of all sorts of capabilities and building stronger systems to ensure the population's safety and security in everyday life are highly assertive and command-like. By using collective and declarative language on numerous occasions (“we will...”) she projects authority and certainty and underscores her decisiveness and capacity for state-building. The statements or promises that she makes in her campaign poster frame threats not as isolated military issues but as constantly evolving challenges, comprised of multiple levels and requiring continuous intervention. There is a clear priority in areas like cybersecurity, intelligence, defense and infrastructure protection, which are typically viewed as “hard” policy domains, and distance from “softer” policy stereotypes frequently associated with female politicians. On one occasion she mentions she will “reduce job losses due to caregiving, childcare, children’s school refusal”, that “a new system of company-led after-school childcare will be established” and that they will “promote the establishment of a national center function for women’s health” (Takaichi 2025). Nevertheless, these are more relevant to the topic of “creating an environment for growth investment and full utilization of talent”, meaning that these issues are taken into consideration more because of their importance to achieving economic prosperity than anything else.

A further example of her communication style and rhetoric is surrounding the geopolitical competition in the region. For example, the statement regarding a territorially disputed group of islets in the East Sea/Sea of Japan, known as Dokdo in Korean and Takeshima in Japanese. They have been a long-standing cause of tension between Japan and South Korea, as they have become a matter of nationalist standing and pride, rooted in the different historic narratives told by the two countries (Wiegand and Choi 2017, 232). On the occasion of “Takeshima Day” declared in 2005 and to the request of sending a top-level official to the event, Takaichi firmly reiterated that “There is no need to be cautious,” and that “There’s no need to read the room. It’s Japanese territory, part of Shimane Prefecture. I believe this is something all of us should know and understand.” (York and Glosserman 2025). Naturally, a statement like this carries a lot of nationalist intent, but that is not the only reason for its significance. The rejection of diplomatic caution in favour of a firm position once again shows that her leadership is rooted in certainty and decisiveness rather than ambiguity.

Geopolitical tension does not stop there. As mentioned previously, Takaichi embraces many of Abe’s policies, including a hawkish stance towards China and increased backing of Taiwan. Following a comment that she made shortly after assuming the role of prime minister in late 2025, regarding the delicate situation with Taiwan, there has been a sort of diplomatic war between China and Japan. She stated that “the so-called Taiwan contingency has become so serious that we have to anticipate a worst-case scenario” and it could result in the deployment of Japan’s self-defense forces (McCurry and Davidson 2025). Japan’s post-war constitution does not allow the use of force to solve international disputes, but a law passed by Shinzo Abe in 2015, allows the country to exercise collective self-defense in certain cases (Kartova 2025, 6). She also warned against China’s “predatory policies” which reflects a much more assertive view than before (York and Glosserman 2025). Once again, firmness and certainty emerge as Takaichi’s main characteristics of leadership. This is not only a policy position and a reflection of her realism-based worldview but also a performance of political masculinity, necessary in order to maintain legitimacy. In addition, by framing the Taiwan issue as directly connected to Japan’s survival, she reinforces the idea of a “fighter” prepared to defend the nation against external threats. Enloe’s concept of militarised femininity helps explain how Takaichi makes use of security discourse and constructs herself as a national protector. This takes the Taiwan issue from a geopolitical one and turns it into a channel through which she demonstrates her competence as a leader and justifies the expansion of Japan’s military and intelligence capabilities. Her stance and refusal to “read the

room” position her as a guardian of the nation’s survival, reinforcing traditional nationalist narratives.

Her crisis-oriented rhetoric is also to be found in economic governance. For instance, she advocates for “strategic fiscal stimulus” and “responsible expansionary fiscal policy”, and these are framed as necessary in strengthening Japan’s resilience to geopolitical and economic threats (Takaichi 2025). Through this lens, issues like technological advancement and economic development are elevated into matters of national survival rather than market efficiency alone. This is once again highlighted with the promise to “establish the "Committee on Foreign Investment in Japan" to strictly review foreign investments”, which positions foreign dependency and vulnerability in the supply chain as national security concerns (Takaichi 2025). Rhetoric like this serves to reinforce her image as a leader capable of handling various crises across economic, military and technological spheres.

What is more, Takaichi is a proponent of the Imperial House Law, which allows only male successors to inherit the Chrysanthemum Throne, the seat of the Emperor of Japan. This is reflected in the campaign as “We will revise the Imperial House Law to protect the male-line imperial succession that has continued for 126 generations.” There had previously been discussions for the government to revise this law due to the lack of male heirs, but the birth of a male nephew in 2019 slowed this momentum (Andreeva 2019, 11). Nevertheless, Takaichi and other right-wing female nationalists have defended this system as preserving Japanese traditions. In addition, Japan still maintains the Koseki System, which as the legal basis dictates that each household should have a male head. This status is passed from father to first and then second son, and for a woman to become head of family she should have an income while her husband does not (Andreeva 2019, 10). This system also mandates that married couples ought to have the same surname, and Takaichi has been a vocal opponent of allowing separate surnames. By defending these two key institutional practices, she sustains the traditional state order, which allows her to gain legitimacy within the LDP and the Diet’s elite male hierarchies. Indeed, institutional rules like imperial succession and the preservation of surnames are manifestations of hegemonic masculinity as they allow for men’s collective dominance over women to continue.

6.2 Party Constitution

6.2.1 South Korea

The institutional and party context of Park Geun-hye's presidency reveals a contradiction between symbolic breakthrough and structural continuity. While she marked a historic first as a female leader, the broader governance framework remained deeply patriarchal, factionalised and centralised within what was described as an “imperial presidency” by the Constitutional Court of Korea during her impeachment trial in 2017 (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2017). The election itself was a breakthrough; however, her administration was frequently criticised as a “woman presidency without women” given that did not utilise the individual power vested in her to institutionalise broader representation for women within her party or the executive (Lee and Jalalzai 2017).

Park's record on descriptive representation was low despite her campaign pledge of being a “prepared female president” (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 611; Lee 2013).⁷ Over the course of her administration, only four out of 42 ministers were women, adding up to approximately 9.5%. Three of them were in the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and one in the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 611). This pattern reflects a broader tendency to confine women to traditionally feminised or softer policy areas, rather than integrating them into more security or economy-related domains. Data from the OECD (2016) further underscores this imbalance. In 2015, women held only around 6% of ministerial positions and 16% for parliamentarian, far below the OECD average of 29% for both (2016, 63). Even her presidential transition committee included just two women out of 28 members, signaling early on that gender inclusion was not a central priority (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 611). Notably, nearly 50% of the central administration workforce was constituted by women, highlighting a pronounced vertical difference (OECD 2016, 63). This indicates that only a small fraction of women occupy senior leadership positions, including deputy, ministerial and other decision-making roles. Such marginal inclusion can be connected to the concept of citizenship as a “fraternity of men” identified by Yuval-Davis, where formal inclusion does not necessarily signify substantive political power. Moreover, Mackay's concept of nested newness explains why this pattern persisted even under a female president.

Gender quotas and representation mechanisms exist in South Korea, however there are key issues in their design and legal strength. The country's mixed-member electoral system differentiates sharply between proportional representation (PR) and single-member districts (SMDs). In the PR tier, there is a mandatory “zipper system” which requires that 50% of candidates are women and are placed on odd-numbered places on the party lists, meaning that men and women should alternate on the lists (Shin and Kwon 2023, 96-97; Lee and Shin 2016, 348). This is backed by strict

⁷ To be described in the following sections.

enforcement mechanisms as the National Election Commission can reject lists that do not meet this requirement entirely. Consequently, gender quotas in PR are met and have proven relatively effective. However, when it comes to SMDs, the quotas are framed differently. The 30% quota is framed merely as a recommendation, which is not legally binding, and non-compliance is not sanctioned. This ambiguity means that the quota is made de facto voluntary, allowing major parties to consistently fall short (Lee and Shin 2016, 348). This gives the impression that parties in Korea are committed to gender equality, but in reality, the gap between formal commitment and actual practice reveals that is not the case. In the Saenuri Party under Park, female candidates accounted for only 6.5% of district nominations in 2012 and 6.3% in 2016 (Shin and Kwon 2023, 98).

One of the primary reasons for non-compliance to the quotas is the clientelistic and under-institutionalised nature of party politics. In this scenario, informal power structures, such as individual personalities and factional loyalty, override formal rules. Oftentimes, candidate selection is controlled by ad hoc committees that reflect the interests of the party leader. During Park's tenure, nominations were used as a tool called "nomination massacre", meaning that people from her own faction were included and rewarded as loyalists, whereas rivals were punished by exclusion (Lee and Shin 2016, 355). For example, 76% or 42 out of 55 of pro-Park incumbents won nominations. The number for pro-Lee incumbents was 33 out of 95 or 35% (Lee and Shin 2016, 356). Indeed, according to a survey, affiliation to a faction is considered the most powerful factor when determining candidates for SMDs, outweighing individual qualifications or gender quotas. An environment like this is especially hostile towards women, who are less likely than men to be a part of these innermost circles of power (Lee and Shin 2016, 360).

Similarly, financial support for women's political participation has been undermined. The Women's Political Development Fund (WPDF), founded in 2004, mandates that 10% of state party subsidies be allocated for the goal of encouraging women's political activities (Korean Women's Development Institute 2023). However, in reality these funds were largely diverted into more general party operations and payroll costs for female staff, rather than for leadership training or support (Korean Women's Development Institute 2023; Shin and Kwon 2023, 102). This is because there are no strict guidelines on how these funds should be spent, which has enabled their repurpose. For instance, under the leadership of the Saenuri Party almost all of the funds were used for personnel expenses, and 80% of the Liberty Korea Party went for female staff salaries. This practice was effectively legitimised by the National Election Commission, which ruled that such real-

location of funds is possible if the employees were working in women-related departments. Despite the cause of the WPDF to spend more money on education and gender policy development, these were not made a priority. As a result, while the 10% requirement was meant to be a minimum floor for investment has instead become a ceiling, given that parties rarely spend additional funds dedicated to gender equality beyond this mandated subsidy (Shin and Kwon 2023, 102). The Women's Nomination Subsidy (WNS) was also introduced to incentivise the 30% quota for SMDs, however it was not successful since large parties considered it insignificant, especially when compared to the political cost of displacing well-established male politicians (Korean Women's Development Institute 2023). Even such incentives have proven too small and insufficient in making tangible breakthroughs and disrupting entrenched patterns of male dominance.

This outcome can be interpreted in line with the theoretical perspective. Formal inclusion mechanisms, such as gender representation quotas and funding, can be co-opted within masculinised institutional environments. Newly introduced gender-equal norms eventually end up getting consumed and constrained by established power relations, which aligns with the concept of “nested newness” once again.

6.2.2 Japan

When it comes to Japan's executive political landscape, women have historically remained restricted to marginal and peripheral roles, on a part-time and non-regular basis (Genna 2021, 8). Despite formal openness, a structured system remains, which is kept in place through the interaction of party composition, representation mechanisms and quotas, and funding structures that work together to reproduce male dominance in executive authority.

To begin with, at the level of party composition, the LDP is a party which functions as a sort of dynastic organisation with insider networks that have operated for a long time. Importance is placed more on the party “brand” and not so much on the individual leader (Ko 2025, 19). As expressed in 6.1.2, as much as 40% of the lawmakers of the LDP Diet are second-generation members who have gained access to their positions by inheritance (Engman 2023, 5). Within such form of institutional continuity, factional personalism further regulates access to power. In a similar vein to the “Park faction” in South Korea, the LDP is comprised of different factions which compete amongst themselves for the most important positions within the cabinet, including the one of the prime minister (Crespo 1995, 205). This “internal democracy” between the factional leaders

means that the level of true partisan competition is low and the party remains an exclusively male-dominated network (Crespo 1995, 205).

Within this organisational context, the conservative governance in Japan has shifted the gender equality discourse from a human rights issue to an economic one. In the same framework as “Abenomics”, introduced under Abe, the government also implemented a “Womenomics” section, corresponding to women and economics, vowing to create a society where “all women can shine”. This policy was implemented for two reasons. Firstly, as a response to the international criticism that Japan had low levels of gender equality in society, and secondly, to deal with the country’s demographic and economic challenges such as the low birth rate, aging population, labour shortage and slow levels of GDP growth (Macnaughtan 2015, 1). The aim of “Womenomics” was for women to fill the employment gap due to long-term underutilisation of female labour and to support the core male labour force (Macnaughtan 2015, 2). Nevertheless, critics argue that it has been an “egalitarian failure” because it seeks to exploit women’s working potential in order to boost Japan’s GDP, but without redefining their fundamental social roles, which has to do with persistent gender norms and practices (Genna 2021). While female employment increased massively, a lot of them remained marginalised in jobs which held fewer benefits (Genna 2021, 8). Thus, rather than redefining power relations or challenging the status quo, this model reinforced the allocation of productive roles to men and reproductive ones to women, both within the family and more broadly in society (Macnaughtan 2015, 2). What is more, one of the goals of “Womenomics” was to have 30% of female members in the cabinet by 2020, which ended up being a failure and had to be revised to 2030 (Genna 2021, 8).

Takaichi’s platform maintains this core “Womenomics” principle of treating women’s participation as necessary for the economy. Similar to Abe, she took the approach as a way to deal with Japan’s demographic crisis and labour shortages through government-incentivized female employment. Like this, her platform can once again be viewed as a tool for crisis management. For instance, during her campaign she pledged to increase the number of women in politics so that they represent ‘Nordic levels’, referencing the high levels of participation in these countries. Despite this vow and rhetorical support for Womenomics, however, her first government in 2025 had only three women. This amounts to just about 15% female members in the House of Representatives, a number drastically lower than the one in Sweden of 45% in Parliament, and 39% in the European Parliament (IPU Parline 2026; European Parliament 2025, 3). Another gap between her pledges and her traditionalist views is the opposition to social reform as she remains opposed to separate

surnames for married couples or revising the male-only Imperial succession system (European Parliament 2025, 3).

The approach to representation mechanisms also reinforces this pattern. Unlike the legislated gender quotas in South Korea, Japan has taken more of a slow or incremental approach to female political empowerment (Iwanaga 2008, 3). To give an example, in 2018 Japanese lawmakers passed a bill that urges parties to even out the level of men and women in both national and local elections. The bill stipulates that every political party must “contribute to efforts to promote gender equality in the political field” (The House of Representatives 2018). However, nowhere is it mentioned how ambitious these efforts should be, or a benchmark that parties should strive for. Indeed, while political party quotas are one of the three ways for governments to implement gender quotas, they are voluntary and do not impose any legal sanctions even if parties do not implement the 50-50 candidate base (Andreeva 2019, 12). This is further evident in the bill under Article 2, stating that “the freedom of political parties and other political organizations to select candidates, the freedom of candidates to run for office, and other freedoms of political activity” is to be ensured (The House of Representatives 2018). Another target sets out for a minimum of 30% of executive positions to be occupied by women by 2030, initially meant for 2020. Still, this target is only for TSE listed private firms, which are only 5% of Japan’s total labour force, and is once again voluntary in nature and does not establish sanctions (Asao, Khera, and Vasishth 2024, 9). What this means is that there are certain targets and mechanisms in place, stricter enforcement is necessary to accommodate the advancement of women into higher positions.

As mentioned in 6.1.2, Japan follows the so-called “iron law of politics” where the more power an office holds, the lower is the representation of women there. Indeed, there are persistent disparities between the House of Representatives or the Lower House, which has superiority in several critical aspects, one of them being the final selection of the prime minister, and the House of Councillors or the Upper House, which has lesser status in the political decision-making process (Iwanaga 2008, 103). Women hold 14.6% of seats in the House of Representatives, compared to the 29.8% in the House of Councillors (IPU Parline 2026). The reasons for this difference are connected to the lower prestige of the Upper House and that there is less competition for office (Iwanaga 2008, 103).

Finally, there are financial and organisational structures which add additional barriers to entry.

Political participation is shaped by the three prerequisites, known as *ban* in Japanese, and a candidate must fulfill them to get elected. These are money (*kaban*), high name recognition (*kanban*) and a good local support base (*jiban*), which combined already give priority to candidates who are men (Iwanaga 2008, 117). Additionally, the reliance of the LDP on big businesses, or *keiretsu* in Japan, for external funding, forms a “triangle of conservative power” that links the big business elites’ interests, the party and bureaucracy, which generally translates to a conservative and pro-business policy and focused on economic growth (Crespo 1995, 200-201). Exclusion is further amplified by the *kôenkai* system, which can be described as personal support organisations for politicians. This system requires extensive financial resources for campaigns and long-term organisation maintenance, which are beyond the reach of most women (Iwanaga 2008, 117).

Institutional structures like the ones identified can be analysed through the theoretical framework. In Connell’s terms, LDP and executive power in Japan can be described as structures of hegemonic masculinity, as access to power is achieved through male-dominated factional networks and organisational structures like *kôenkai* or *keiretsu* funding, all of which privilege men and reproduce the idea of politics as a masculine domain. The persistence of the “iron law of politics” further reflects how institutional power is gendered at its core. It is also interesting to look at this from Yuval-Davis’s perspective. Policies like “Womenomics” frame women primarily as tools for demographic and economic survival rather than rights-based equality. Therefore, traditional structures and patriarchal norms remain intact. Traditional national boundaries and gender roles are further reproduced by Takaichi’s reforms to social reforms.

7. Gendered Nationalism

7.1 Policy Orientation and Gender Advocacy

7.1.1 South Korea

Park’s policy agenda is essential to this thesis. Analysis reveals that her record of substantive representation exhibits mixed results, with women-friendly rhetoric and expansion of certain institutional frameworks (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 602). Alongside this, however, comes the critique that commitment is limited, and the outcomes are more symbolic than structural (Lee 2023, 773).

As explained in Section 6.1, Park’s route to the presidency started early on in her life, not only because of her family’s legacy, but also because she was a national legislator for fourteen years.

During that time, she sponsored fifteen bills, only one of which was related to women's issues. This is not out of the ordinary, given that majority of legislators never proposed any bills regarding women's issues (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 602). The bill she proposed was pertaining to the abolition of the Hoju System or the "Family-Head First Principle" which allowed only males to represent the family (Mun 2015, 255). The system ceased to exist in 2008. This suggests that even within the consequences that she rose to power as an "appendage syndrome" some structural changes to gender equality occurred in South Korea, which have not yet manifested in Japan. Still, upon assuming office, her policy priorities were mostly connected to economic development and national competitiveness. Her flagship initiative, the "Creative Economy", aimed to create a "Second Miracle on the Han River" by converging science, technology and industry, emphasising innovation and growth and creating more jobs (Connell 2013,1; The Korea Herald 2013). This was an economically ambitious project (albeit not entirely transformative), but it was also largely silent on gender justice. It reinforced the prioritisation of economic development and national security, viewed traditionally as more masculine domains, over social transformation.

Nevertheless, her presidential record is not entirely devoid of women-friendly policies and gender advocacy. The fact that they were not as prioritised as the "creative economy" project and economic democratisation, does not necessarily mean that such efforts were completely overlooked (Mun 2015, 259). Major policy highlights, incorporated under a set of "7 Women-Friendly Policies", include policies for pregnant employees, such as nutrition programs, shorter working hours and small subsidies to women giving birth. Furthermore, in her inaugural address she vowed to provide safety and security for women, by building a "safe society where women [...] can feel secure as they carry on with their lives, no matter where they are in the country" (The Korea Herald 2013). Still, "women" were mentioned only once, whereas commitment to the happiness of the people was mentioned over 20 times. She also advocated for an increase in the number of women within government and management organisations, parental leave policies for both men and women, higher public spending for daycare facilities, and targeted programs to address career interruptions among married women were implemented (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 602; 607). Her promises included providing vocational training tailored to different skills and job referral services to help women re-enter the workforce after marriage or childbirth. A lot of these policies can be traced back to her administration's liberal predecessors, however Park took them further, so in some instances women's substantive representation was indeed enhanced, most notably seen in the double increase of daycare spending and extended parental leave (Lee and Jalalzai 2017, 612). Despite these efforts, as shown before, very few women were nominated to high-ranking political

positions, contrasting her campaign pledge. Additionally, South Korea remained the country with the highest wage gap among OECD countries during her tenure (and to this day), indicating the persistence of structural inequalities (OECD 2024). Still, even though the impacts of Park's gender policies had been limited and uncertain, she did undertake certain measures to improve women's working conditions (Mun 2015, 262).

Important to note is that prior to the 2012 presidential elections, she mostly kept a distance from using gender as a marker in her career. In the last month, she strategically started harnessing her femininity as a way to advance her politics. By evoking ideas of herself as "motherly" or "mother-like" in her election campaign and reaffirming the slogan "the prepared female president" she was able to make up for the difference in voting patterns between men and women (Mun 2015). This strategic use of gender stereotypes, such as saying that she was "married to the nation" created a patriotic image and earned her a reputation for integrity and proved to be effective among housewives, but resonated less with working women (Hahm and Heo 2018, 655; Mun 2015, 256). The strategic use of maternal and nationalist imagery further positioned her within a maternal nationalist framework, aligning with Enloe's argument that nationalism is structured partially through feminised symbolism of care and sacrifice.

A shift like this indicates a distinction between embracing gender but not feminist politics and can be described by the dynamic "femininity without feminism" where female identity is mobilised for political legitimacy without accompanying female accomplishments (Mun 2015).

Moreover, her employed rhetorical strategy demonstrates that it is ideas, rather than the identity of the politician that matter for political representation, given that her presence did not translate to ideas of feminist politics. While her election generated symbolic disruption, it was her framing of gender, not gender itself, that shaped political meaning. Her statement "How can we speak of sexual discrimination, if a woman can be elected as President?" shows that she viewed her own success as proof that structural discrimination was no longer a major hurdle, a common belief, which further illustrates this logic as it equates descriptive representation as evidence of the improvement of women's political position (Mun 2015, 250).

Despite her lack of feminist consciousness and of well-defined female agenda, Park's presence in power triggered several unintended symbolic effects. Her existence as head of state advanced the promotion of women in other sectors, such as journalism, banks, and automobiles, leading to a

wave of female first in areas which were once male-monopolised. Another “gender effect” was that Park as the first female president generated a lot of media coverage and discourse and served as a reference point for debates regarding the status of women in Korean society (Mun 2015, 266-267). In this sense, it was her existence rather than her feminist intent that triggered broader discursive change. Importantly, these gender effects were not entirely produced by Park herself, but they were rather contingent on the gradual increase in visibility of women in media. Her presidency acted as a catalyst more than a cause, amplified existing trends and set the scene for increased public debates. In this sense, her leadership highlights how symbolic breakthroughs can generate discursive change even in the absence of substantive policy transformation.

Overall, her policy orientation focused more on population welfare and economic advancement – coined as “masculine” state objectives - rather than gender justice. While her administration expanded childcare and labour support systems, it failed to address deep structural inequalities, including the persistent OECD high gender wage gap, which remained above 36% during her term. An analysis like this suggests that her presidency was a symbolic breakthrough that lacked the “politics of ideas” necessary for lasting gender transformation. Her 2015 agreement with Japan regarding the “comfort women” issue further damaged her legitimacy as a representative for women’s interests, as many felt she failed to protect the historical dignity of female victims and questioned her ability to handle complex diplomatic crises (Kim 2023, 2; Matsuo 2020). Connecting to Yuval-Davis’ argument that women serve as markers of national honor explains why there was public backlash to this agreement – many felt that a woman leader had failed in her symbolic duty to protect the nation’s most vulnerable women.

Moreover, her impeachment had a paradoxical impact on gender in South Korea, as it shifted her status from a “breakthrough” or a “trailblazer” to a “barrier” for future female leaders, but at the same time generated unintended positive gains. On the one hand, survey data shows that most women believed that her impeachment would serve as a barrier for female politicians to be elected and an overwhelming majority of participants were doubtful that a female president would be elected soon as a result (Lee 2023, 771). What is more, there was a difference between conservative and liberal ideologies. Conservative men connected her impeachment to her incompetence, linking it to her gender as an individual quality, whereas liberal participants viewed it as a reflection of persistent, structural sexism that was reinforced by her fall (Lee 2023, 772). The impeachment also exacerbated existing Confucian traditional beliefs that women are not fit for being in positions of power and gendered attacks, such as “unfilial daughter” and “doll” were used by the

media and the public, once again highlighting the present gender bias in society (Kim 2023, 3). Her earlier image as “married to the nation”, once a sign of selfless dedication, was now reinterpreted as a “relatability gap,” suggesting she could not represent ordinary women because she lacked the shared life experiences necessary, like marriage or childcare (Lee 2023, 769).

On the other hand, her impeachment led to some unexpected empowering effects. Ironically, the survey results showed that it was her impeachment and not her election as the first female president that mobilised women to enter the political sphere. Examples to this point are the peaceful protests and candlelight vigils that led to her ousting. This period saw an increased female participation and interest in politics and was a sign of a maturing democracy and civil society in the country (Hahm and Heo 2018, 661; Lee 2023, 773). Alongside generating discourse and the “gender effects”, her presidency also highlighted the “masculine and militarized nature of political life” in Korea, bringing the need for substantive representation and not merely descriptive (Shin 2018, 82).

The aftermath of the impeachment reveals a contrast in how the public interprets presidential failure based on gender. When male leaders are inefficient, their failings tend to be attributed to individual characteristics like corruption, bribery or politicking (Iwanaga 2008, 242). With Park Geun-hye's impeachment, male focus groups specifically linked her gender to her inability to lead efficiently, devaluating it as a “women failure”, and in doing so effectively casting doubt on the potential for leadership of all Korean women (Shin 2018, 75). Something like this aligns with Cynthia Enloe's observation that women in power are often treated as representatives of their entire sex and the actions of a single woman are used to generalise suitability for such roles, and Yuval-Davis' argument that women serve as symbolic markers of collective identity. Furthermore, because Park attempted to adopt a masculine style to command authority over militarised and bureaucratic institutions, her eventual failure resulted in the top political leadership being reinstated as an almost exclusively masculine terrain, as the public individualised her failure as a gender-based weakness, supporting the theory of hegemonic masculinity. Her presidency then did not translate into progress for women's rights and may have temporarily closed the door she initially appeared to have opened, given that trust in women as political leaders in South Korea decreased, a pattern standing in opposition to global trends (Lee 2023, 757).

7.1.2 Japan

An analogous analysis of Sanae Takaichi's policies follows. Given her recent assumption to the prime minister post, her policies are yet to be fully realised and ought to be monitored, however her election campaign promises and speeches she has given until now, show similar indication of economic growth and national security defense as the main identified areas of priority.

Starting with her economic policy, her primary project of "Sanaenomics" shifts the focus from the private sector as it was the case for "Abenomics" towards state-led crisis management and national resilience, especially in the context of rising geopolitical tensions in East Asia (European Parliament 2025, 2). This project also puts emphasis on focused government spending on areas like semiconductors, AI and green energy to protect Japan from regional threats. Furthermore, energy policy, more specifically nuclear energy, is treated as a long-term investment and pillar of national security and independence from foreign supply chains and not just a transitional fuel. This illustrates how her policies consistently merge economic management with national security concerns. When it comes to foreign policy and security, she aims to ensure that Japan has strengthened alliances with the US, South Korea and the Philippines and that it plays a more significant role in promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region (European Parliament 2025, 2-3). The success of her platform was confirmed by the snap election she called in February 2026, in which the LDP secured 316 out of 465 seats, the first-ever single supermajority since the end of World War II (Ward 2026). Such a huge election victory gave her the platform to initiate constitutional revisions, specifically regarding Article 9, to deepen the country's military and intelligence capabilities, to push harder against China, and to course a more restrictive immigration policy (Chotiner 2026). Such grand support at the snap elections speaks to the broader rightward shift in Japan in the recent decades, especially clear given the priority towards security, economic stability and nationalist rhetoric, over the pacifist orientation of some of the opposition parties.

The fact that she is the first ever female Japanese Prime Minister is not something that she has emphasised during her campaign, and as critics say, "her own views are anti-feminist" (Chotiner 2026). What has been an interesting divide in Japanese society is the one between some women who say that "It's great that a woman has gotten to this level because this will be an inspiration to other women." and others that "No, you've got to look at what somebody says and does and not who their identity is." (Chotiner 2026). Indeed, to rise within the LDP and gain the support of its conservative majority, such as Abe and other politicians just like himself, one cannot do so as a feminist. Thus, her approach to gender or lack thereof is not so surprising given the long history of perseverance of male dominance within Japanese political leadership.

Still, her election as the first woman brought some kind of symbolic representation or breakthrough with it but that does not necessarily translate into substantive reform. This is evident in a few cases. For example, the promise to increase female political participation to “Nordic levels”, as well as proposing partial tax deductions for babysitting expenses and corporate tax incentives for companies providing childcare facilities. Nonetheless, despite this rhetoric and the limited recognition of structural barriers facing working women, her first cabinet featured only three female ministers, thereby continuing the long-standing tradition of underrepresentation of women within executive politics. Moreover, her overall approach is rooted in the same logic as “Womenomics” or the inclusion of women in the labour market primarily as an economic necessity and not a matter of social justice or gender equality. For instance, she has proposed family-friendly fiscal incentives like tax deductions for babysitting fees and corporate tax breaks for companies providing in-house childcare. Additionally, she supports ideas like remote work and flexible hours but prefers these are not enforced, an approach critics argue does little for the part-time and contract workers who comprise over 50% of the female workforce (Asao, Khera, and Vasishth 2024, 3). So, women have been integrated into the national economy strategy without fundamentally changing traditional gender norms regarding family structure or political authority. A case in point is Takaichi’s strong opposition to important social reforms, such as the surname system for married couples saying that it “may destroy the social structure based on family units” or revision to the male-only succession law, calling it “a precious treasure unique to Japan, rare in the world.” (Chai and Crabtree 2026, 2). Thereby, by her stance on issues like these, it is evident that she has positioned herself as a defender of traditional family values and patriarchal social order.

One of the few gender-specific reforms she has entertained is concerning Japan’s prostitution law. The Prostitution Prevention Law does not criminalise buyers, but legal penalties focus largely on women who solicit customers in public spaces, resulting in unequal treatment of sellers and buyers within the legal framework. Under the law, prostitution itself is formally prohibited, yet many associated entertainment industries are tolerated and regulated (Takao 2026). Interesting to mention here is that historically the legal structures in East Asia have treated the female sex worker as the “social evil” rather than the male buyer (Iwanaga 2008, 164). Japan’s prostitution regime thus reflects a broader system of moral regulation where women are simultaneously disciplined and protected, while men remain largely invisible within the law. In November 2025, Takaichi suggested that her government review this law by shifting the penalty to the buyer (Takao 2026). By proposing this legal shift, she is addressing the specific gender disparity in the criminal justice

system where women have historically borne the burden of the trade. This proposed reform aligns with her broader agenda of national resilience and crisis management as it frames the protection of exploitation of women as a matter of public safety and social order. In order for his reform to succeed, it is human rights that should be at the center of the policy, and the realities of Japan's sex industry should be confronted (Takao 2026).

This can further be interpreted through the gendered nationalism framework, specifically Yuval-Davis's argument that women function as symbolic boundary markers of the nation. In nationalist discourse, women are often framed as guardians of the moral integrity and cultural continuity of the state. By shifting the legal focus and penalty, she symbolically relocates the dishonour of prostitution from the female body, or the seller, and places it on buyer who is perceived to be exploiting them. This fits into her version of strong families being the backbone of society, as it preserves the Japanese national body and maintains traditional patriarchal structures, given that it focuses more on state protection than women's autonomous rights. Hence, it can be interpreted as a move that protects the vulnerable, while maintaining social order and not so much a push for women's sexual autonomy.

Another interesting aspect of Takaichi's leadership is the rise of "Sana-mania" or the intense personal popularity surrounding her. Within the framework of gendered nationalism, this dimension is of importance because it shows how personal appeal and descriptive representation can be used to soften a hardline nationalist agenda while simultaneously relieving the pressure for a substantive gender reform. Her "rock-star image" and past as a heavy metal drummer and motorbike enthusiast, draws voters in as it is a welcome change from the "the staid, male-dominated world of Japanese politics." (Chai and Crabtree 2026, 4). This kind of image allows her to draw support from both men and women from different generations (Robinson 2025). This support looks like themed merchandise and massive social media presence, which significantly surpasses her predecessors and the LDP in general. Further, her popularity is especially high among the young, with more than 90% of 18- to 19-year-olds supporting her (Chai and Crabtree 2026, 5). This trend and personality mania within Japanese youth reflects a shift towards authoritarian values that resonates with her rhetoric about resilience and independent nation. The most significant connection to gendered nationalism is perhaps the "substitution effect" which allows voters to experience symbolic satisfaction from seeing a woman in power, which effectively replaces and reduces the need for substantive gender-related reforms (Chai and Crabtree 2026, 2). Her popularity portrays progress and political changes for many voters yet masks the fact that her policy positions reinforce the

traditional patriarchal order. For instance, same-sex marriage is supported by 91% of women and 75% of men between the ages of 18 and 30, whereas Takaichi is against such reform, illustrating how voters can adjust their policy preferences to match the ones of the leader they support (Chai and Crabtree 2026, 5). Consequently, this provides an example how in a nationalist state, a woman's personal popularity can be used as a tool to provide a feminine face for military expansion and historical revisionism.

7.2 Nationalist Positioning

7.2.1 South Korea

Park Geun-hye's nationalist positioning was rooted in dynastic descent and the nostalgic legacy of the memory of the "Miracle on the Han River", placing her within Enloe's concept of "masculinized memory" where national identity is built around male historical figures and women are incorporated as extensions of that legacy rather than as autonomous political actors themselves. The way she branded nationalism was through combining a sort of maternal populism with a hard-line security stance to legitimate her rule. This can be seen through her portrayal as a "filial daughter" which allowed her to emphasise her destiny to be in politics and later as someone who "married the nation", using her unmarried status as evidence of complete dedication to the nation rather than as a deviation from traditional gender expectations (Shin 2018, 72; Hahm and Heo 2017, 655; Lee 2017, 383). Both of these framings reflect the argument put forward by Yuval-Davis that women function as symbolic reproducers of national continuity. Her authority was not self-generated but derived from her positioning within an existing nationalist narrative and framed her candidacy as a form of national duty. It further underscored her sincerity and personal motivation as a proof of her genuine patriotic dedication, distancing herself from the private self-interests of corrupt male politicians (Lee 2017, 383).

Moreover, given that the South Korean presidency is viewed as a highly masculinised role partially due to the constant security threat from North Korea, but also the general instability in the region. Because of that she frequently appeared in a military uniform at the DMZ, addressed the nuclear threats in a 2016 speech, and visited military bases as a way to counteract stereotypes of female softness and prove her competence as a commander-in-chief. This illustrates how she drew on militarised masculinity for legitimacy within a top political leadership position, a prototype of hegemonic masculinity, shaped by performance and discourse (Shin 2018, 79). Yet, this performance was structurally constrained because she was criticised for a lack of sufficient empathy and

decisiveness as a commander, caught in the double-bind dilemma identified by Shin (2018) and Eagly and Karau (2002). The result is that her nationalist positioning reinforced rather than challenged the gendered order. She mobilised feminist nationalist symbolism, such as filial duty, national sacrifice, and motherly rhetoric, without propelling the feminist nationalist tradition which links women's rights to broader projects of democratic and social transformation.

7.2.2 Japan

In the case of Takaichi, the nationalist positioning is more explicit and central than Park's as it is not a resource that she draws on selectively but a more consistent part of her policy legitimacy. From her ideological inheritance from Abe and her affiliation with *Nippon Kaigi* to recent public addresses, her revisionist nationalist project is not difficult to see. It aims at challenging postwar narratives and to reassert national pride. Her nationalist positioning is expressed not only through policy but also symbolic acts of historical remembrance. Her visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's war dead, including Class-A war criminals are buried, have been well documented, and a source of tension with both South Korea and China (Murakami 2026; European Parliament 2025, 2). By them, this is seen as a move of glorifying Japan's wartime past, but she has defended the act as a legitimate one and argued that it should not "become a diplomatic issue" (Murakami 2026). A framing like this reflects the broader revisionist framework in which historical memory is treated as a question of national pride and sovereignty rather than regional accountability. Following her election, she has not visited the place, but instead she limited the practice to a monetary offering during this year's spring festival, showing that she is attempting to balance domestic nationalist expectations with international criticisms (Murakami 2026). Read through the framework, the shrine visits can be seen as defining the national collectivity through a particular reading of history and positioning Japan's dead as legitimate objects of national mourning, going in complete contradiction to the narratives of neighbouring states.

What is more, her defence of the male-only succession system, opposition of same-sex marriage and separate surnames show that despite being a first female PM, she is a guardian of the traditional order. These should be seen merely as policy positions but in Yuval-Davis's terms acts of defining who belongs and on what terms, or sustaining the gendered boundaries of the national "we".

Another instance in which her nationalist positioning is evident is the "national resilience" frame within her "Sanaenomics" project, exemplifying consistent securitisation of various social and economic policies. As established in 7.1.2, this economic framework links everything from semi-

conductor chains to childcare provision as matters of national resilience, and places utmost importance on industrial growth and military expansion. What this does is incorporate women's labour and welfare into the national project rather than just treat them as a means towards equal rights. What is also key to mention in regards to this is the "Sana-mania" as her personal popularity allows nationalist and patriarchal policy positions to produce an image as a disruptor from the usual LDP members, leading to a substitution effect in which symbolic representation replaces the need for substantive gender reforms as it relieves public pressure (Charles and Crabtree 2026, 2). These are the main canals through which her nationalist stance becomes visible. Overall, her positioning is constitutive of her leadership, and it actively dictates the scope of gender reform she can endorse while remaining legitimate within the political bloc.

8. Cross-Case Comparison

8.1 Routes to Power

The analysis of the two female leaders shows that even though they arrived at the executive office through different mechanisms, the same underlying logic is present. Park's dynastic capital and Takaichi's ideological inheritance from Abe are structurally comparable: in both cases, legitimacy is passed on through proximity to a dominant male figure. In Park's case, it is her father's legacy and nostalgic capital, and for Takaichi, it is her connection to a former PM and her relationship within the political party.

What Iwanaga (2008) identified then as the "appendage syndrome" might actually be true for both cases and can be argued that it does not only have to apply in its literal form as described by him, but also as a broader principle. Mackay's concept of "nested newness" helps explain why this is not incidental. As she argues, all institutions are encoded with masculine legacies from the past, including various norms, power and rules. Because such practices had already been in place for centuries, the entrance of female leaders could not bypass them.

8.2 Hegemonic Masculinity in Practice

The double bind dilemma conceptualised earlier in the paper is also relevant to both leaders, however, it reflects the different institutional contexts. On the one hand, Park shifted between agentic qualities, such as decisiveness, assertiveness and control, and communal ones like sympathy and maternal symbolism, but without satisfying either set of expectations. Takaichi, on the other hand, has thus far exhibited almost entirely agentic characteristics, seen by her securitised and command-oriented leadership style. So, there is asymmetry in how they operate. Yet, both confirm Connell's

framework rather than challenge it. The “narrow band of acceptable behaviour”, as put by Eagly and Karau (2002), differs in each context, but in both cases is defined by masculine institutional norms.

8.3 Substantive Representation

Park expanded childcare funding and provided job re-entry policies, and Takaichi has proposed deductions for babysitting expenses and incentives for the provision of childcare facilities, as well as rhetorical pledges for inclusion. In both cases, women in reproductive and caregiving roles are in focus, leaving the deeper structures of male dominance intact. The formal inclusion mechanisms presented in Chapter 6.2, like cabinet pledges and gender quotas, were absorbed into existing power structures without necessarily transforming them, which is precisely what Mackay’s nested newness predicts. The patriarchal dividend, in Connell’s terms, means that female leaders who have reached the top political positions by accommodating masculine norms are poorly positioned to overcome them.

8.4 Nationalism and the Gender Activism Gap

The relationship to feminist nationalist tradition in South Korea and Japan is quite divergent. As traced in section 5.3.2, South Korean feminist nationalism has framed issues in the service of gender equality also as ones advancing democratic institutions and strengthening post-colonial dignity. This created a space for Park Geun-hye to draw on these movements in order to advance substantive reform. Her failure to do so, as seen in the 2015 agreement regarding the comfort women issue, ruptured her relationship with this tradition. The public backlash reflects Yuval Davis’s argument that women serve as symbolic markers of the nation and that negative consequences arise when they fail to meet these expectations.

In contrast, in Japan the feminist nationalist tradition has developed in different ways. Here, female nationalist activism has primarily used women's authority to defend the state’s historical narrative rather than challenge its gendered power structures, and Takaichi operates at the executive level of this formation. Her Yasukuni Shrine visits, opposition to structural reforms and revisionism all reproduce the logic that Enloe identifies; that is that nationalist projects normalise gender roles, and women who participate most successfully in the nationalist project do so on its pre-established norms. Therefore, it is not simply Takaichi’s individual ideology but also the institutional conditions which have made it so that the space for feminist nationalism at the executive level in Japan is much narrower than the one in South Korea.

8.5 Symbolic Breakthroughs and Structural Continuity

The analysis provided and the comparison produce findings which can be applied beyond either case individually. Symbolic breakthroughs and structural continuity are actively co-produced within masculinist nationalist contexts, rather than in tension with them. Park's own comment that her ascension to the presidency meant that structural discrimination was no longer a major obstacle, and the substitution effect generated by Takaichi's personal popularity, are two expressions of the same dynamic: namely, that symbolic representation reduces the perceived urgency of structural reform. The glass ceiling is therefore not shattered but temporarily removed for some exceptional individuals, but their exceptionalism is partly because they have been willing to reproduce the norms that generate said ceiling. This is the interesting paradox that these cases constitute, and it points to a broader theoretical discussion: female presence in top political roles may in such conditions defer rather than promote substantive gender transformation.

9. Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the research question of "How do the conservative and nationalist political contexts in Japan and South Korea mediate the relationship between female executive leadership and substantive gender reform?". As such, it looked at the intersection of nationalism, conservatism and gender and their role in shaping leadership practices and policy outcomes in the respective countries, focusing on Park Geun-hye and Sanae Takaichi as the primary case studies. To answer this, the thesis developed a framework rooted in the theories of Raewyn Connell, Cynthia Enloe, and Nira Yuval-Davis. This theoretical framework was then grounded in the context and historical background of global gender equality norms, regional patterns of female political participation in Asia, and the specific Confucian-influenced cultures and women agency in South Korea and Japan. Following this historical chapter, chapters six and seven were developed, each divided into two sections, providing analysis of the leadership and political capital, party structure and organisation, gender advocacy and policy orientation and nationalist positioning. A brief cross-case comparison chapter then drew the findings together, and this conclusion chapter synthesises everything, answers the research question, and provides implications and venues for further research.

To answer the research question, mediation happens on three levels, or more accurately through three interconnected mechanisms, which can be concluded from the preceding chapters. These

three mechanisms make it structurally improbable, but not impossible, for women to make substantive gender reform once they reach executive office within male-dominated contexts. Arguably, the first one is legitimization. Park's legitimacy was grounded in the legacy of her father's rule and nostalgia for his time of accelerated development nationalism, whereas Takaichi's was in her ideological similarity to Shinzo Abe and three decades of institutional immersion within the LDP. The routes to executive power are not exactly the same but both required acceptance of the previously established masculine institutional norms that they are structured around. In this context, pursuing substantive reform would have meant challenging these structures, like factional loyalty and securitised governance, the same ones through which their authority was constructed.

The second one is the absorption of certain formal mechanisms, that were put into place to advance gender equality but have instead been absorbed by the conservative and nationalist institutional environments in both countries. In South Korea these are the quota systems, in Japan the voluntary gender targets. Once again, Mackay's nested newness concept helps to explain this phenomenon – even if new gender-equal norms are established, they end up being hollowed out because of existing gendered institutional environments. For example, even though Korea's WPDF's money was directed towards leadership training and support, majority of it ended up being distributed towards general pay costs and party operations. Similarly, in Japan gender targets for increased female participation in executive positions end up being pushed back or remain unsanctioned. What this demonstrates is that gender-related issues are not the priority in either country, and that the conservative party structures actively resist the redistribution of power because that would threaten the patriarchal dividend that sustains them.

The third one has to do with nationalist symbolic framing. As seen from the theoretical framework, nationalism tends to assign specific roles to women, be it as reproducers of national continuity or boundary markers of honour. Roles like these, however, are fundamentally incompatible with the pursuit of structural gender equality. Looking into the specific case studies — Park was framed as filial daughter and symbolic mother of the nation, and Takaichi defends patriarchal institutions as expressions of Japan's unique cultural heritage. This nationalist framing protects such structures and makes their reform much harder, making substantive gender reform both politically costly and in contradiction with the nation.

Together, these produce a main finding – symbolic breakthroughs without structural transformation. The symbolic breakthroughs refer to the fact that both leaders achieved historic firsts, and the discursive effects that they generated are not trivial. The substitution effect, applicable to both

cases, reduces the need for substantive gender-related reforms, meaning that under conservative nationalist conditions, descriptive representation can actively work against substantive reform, appearing progressive but lacking substance. As Ko (2025, 26) cautions, “any conclusions about a country’s state of gender equality or women’s rights should not be drawn based on the presence or lack thereof of female leaders”. Indeed, the divergence between GGI and GII discussed in Chapter 1 already signals this empirically for both South Korea and Japan. Ultimately, the glass ceiling in these countries is cracked but not broken, and the underlying gendered hierarchies that produce it remain largely intact.

As acknowledged in the methodology chapter, a limitation of this thesis is the recent election of Takaichi, which means that it is too early to make any concrete assessments regarding her government’s policies, as it might take longer before they manifest. Therefore, a venue for future research would be a long-term study tracking any measurable shifts in gender representation or gender-related policies in Japan.

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