



Colmena Fund Regional Convening for Asia

*Embracing the Transformative Power
of Women's Leadership*

**Bangkok, Thailand
August 6-7, 2024**



Colmena fund
for Women's Political Power



Table of Contents

4	<u>Executive Summary</u>
6	<u>Introduction</u>
7	<u>Regional Context, Challenges and Needs</u>
10	<u>Innovative Ideas and Actionable Recommendations for Programmatic Strategies</u>
12	<u>Potential Proposals on Opportunities and Partnerships</u>
16	<u>Conclusion: Gratitude and Commitment</u>
16	<u>Acknowledgements</u>





Executive Summary

Colmena Fund convened a participatory two-day gathering of twenty-seven diverse women leaders from across Asia and beyond to refine its strategy and develop actionable solutions for advancing women's and feminist political leadership. The event brought together politicians, activists, and representatives from various organizations, fostering an environment of solidarity and knowledge-sharing. Participants emphasized the need for a holistic approach to supporting women in politics, addressing challenges such as gender-based violence, limited resources, and entrenched societal barriers.

Key recommendations for Colmena Fund included focusing on grassroots organizations and marginalized communities, creating strong solidarity networks, and providing comprehensive support throughout women's political careers. Participants stressed the importance of flexible and sustainable funding models, capacity building through training and mentorship programs, and addressing security concerns for women in politics. The need for narrative building and increased visibility for women leaders was highlighted, along with the importance of adapting strategies to local contexts and involving local partners.

Actionable ideas proposed included developing a database of resources for political party funding, implementing gender audits of parties, and creating

platforms for sharing best practices among women political leaders. Participants also suggested establishing cross-regional learning opportunities, investing in social media and communication strategies, and developing wellbeing and resilience training for politicians. The fund was encouraged to consider supporting women political leaders in local and non-national elections to mitigate risks and expand its impact. Overall, the convening emphasized the need for Colmena Fund to play a unifying role in the ecosystem, fostering collaboration and innovation in advancing women's political leadership.

Based on the report, below are key recommendations for Colmena Fund's strategy in the region that were repeatedly emphasized during the meeting:

- 1. Focus on grassroots and marginalized communities:** Support smaller, grassroots organizations and women from marginalized backgrounds.
- 2. Develop strong solidarity networks:** Create and strengthen networks for women political leaders, both regionally and globally, to share experiences and strategies .
- 3. Provide holistic support:** Offer comprehensive support throughout the lifecycle of women's political leadership: 1)

before entering formal politics, 2) during campaigning, 3) after elected leadership role, and 4) post-leadership departure.

4. **Implement flexible and sustainable funding models:** Develop funding approaches that are long-term, flexible, and adaptable to different contexts.
5. **Prioritize capacity building:** Offer training, mentorship, and skill development programs for women in politics.
6. **Address safety, security and wellbeing:** Develop strategies to tackle violence against women in politics, including digital security and mental health support.
7. **Emphasize narrative building and visibility:** Create and promote feminist political narratives and increase visibility for women leaders from most marginalized backgrounds

8. **Adapt to local and regional contexts:** Understand and respect local and regional political landscapes, involving local women political leaders and feminist and social movement partners in decision-making.
9. **Support innovative measurement and impact strategies:** Develop clear goals and metrics for measuring impact, while ensuring these processes don't stifle innovation.
10. **Consider supporting local and non-national elections:** Explore opportunities to support women in local politics as a way to mitigate risks and expand impact.



“*The convening was like giving wings to our vision for equitable representation of women in politics while also strengthening the roots of each participant in the collective sisterhood. Hearing and learning from various contexts, sharing challenges and brainstorming solutions really have me hope that it's possible to build a movement, step by step.*”

—Convening participant reflection from meeting evaluation

Introduction

Participant Demographics:

Represented Countries: Thailand, Taiwan, Philippines, India, Bangladesh, South Korea, Indonesia, and others.

Participant Positions: participants held or had held significant political positions or worked in organizations supporting women in politics.

Personal Journeys: Many shared personal anecdotes about their entry into politics or activism, often highlighting unexpected paths and challenges faced as women in these roles.

Focus Areas: Participants' work spanned various areas, including:

- *Political party leadership and reform*
- *Grassroots movements and local-level politics*
- *Capacity building for women leaders*
- *Support for marginalized communities in politics*
- *Feminist activism and funding*
- *Policy work and democracy building*

In early August 2024, Colmena Fund convened a two-day meeting in Bangkok, Thailand with key diverse regional stakeholders to:

Foster solidarity and connection: Foster solidarity, meaningful connection, and shared ownership to engage in dynamic exchanges that support the political leadership of women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

Identify regional challenges and opportunities: Identify regional and country specific challenges, lessons learned, socio-political contexts, gaps, and opportunities.

Co-create shared strategic and actionable recommendations: Co-create and shape shared transformative and responsive recommendations for the fund's future direction.

The enriching and participatory dialogue led to numerous innovative ideas and thematic areas to reflect and take action on moving forward. Throughout the meeting participants shared their personal experiences as women political leaders navigating complex and often volatile political landscapes, deliberated on insights and strategy, and deepened connections with one another.

The following includes an overview of discussions related to: 1) Regional Contexts, Challenges and Needs; 2) Innovative Ideas and Actionable Recommendations for Programmatic Strategies; and 3) Potential Proposals on Opportunities and Partnerships.



Regional Context, Challenges and Needs

To kickstart the discussion, **participants had the opportunity to listen to dynamic presentations from the perspectives of *stakeholders representing politics, civil society supporting political leadership, and philanthropy.***

The presentations ignited independent thinking and group discussions to brainstorm ideas and solutions in response to the greatest challenges that women political leaders face in the region.

- **Challenges included:** Political Structures, Societal and Cultural Barriers, Violence and Harassment, Political Engagement, Representation Issues.
- **While solutions centered around:** Training and Support, Policy and Structural Changes, Visibility and Representation, Communication and Narrative, Diversity and Inclusion, Campaign Support, and Funding and Resources.

Upon further distillation with the group, participants delved into the following four key points of entry for the fund in the region:



<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Tools</i>
<p>Campaign Infrastructure: Participants defined this as support needed to win elections, varying by country and political party backing. Challenges include long campaign periods (up to 6 months) and managing time, funds, and resources.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship-building strategies with communities and social movements • Team formation for local constituency connections • Agenda-setting based on people's demands and needs, while managing expectations
<p>Funding: The group emphasized that money is crucial, but funding goes beyond cash to include organizational resources for women's networks as support systems. They highlighted the need for resources for core funding and support for engaging with political parties, which are often reliant on volunteers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matrix of success for women's political representation (beyond quotas) • Risk management strategies for funding distribution • Documentation and research funding mechanisms • Long-term and short-term mentorship programs
<p>Capacity Building: Participants acknowledged that capacity building can be a bandaid to structural issues. Challenges include trained individuals dropping out and campaigns often adhering to the status quo.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen training programs for progressive politics • Inner party transparency mechanisms • Accountability frameworks within parties
<p>Political Parties: The discussion centered on parties as gatekeepers with diverse identities and ideologies. Challenges include the concept of "winnability" often denying feminists access and parties not modernizing at the pace of society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming parties from within • Spreading success stories of democratic models globally • Funding to modernize political parties • Branding as a collective movement



In addition, **three key areas of opportunities emerged:**

Voter Engagement:

- Women increasingly seen as swing voters
- Creating voter blocks for change

Youth Involvement:

- Youth activism leading protests
- Activist/ movement to formal politics pipeline
- Increase interactions with youth movements and parties

Narrative Building:

- Cultivate and shape narratives that focus on women in politics winning
- Shape communication on normalizing women in politics and gains of feminist leadership



This convening opens up for more possibilities, inspiration, and connections that can add more fuel to change political landscape in our country."

—Convening participant reflection from meeting evaluation





Innovative Ideas and Actionable Recommendations for Programmatic Strategies



In an effort to co-create and envision Colmena Fund's programmatic future, participants engaged in a dynamic learning exercise to provoke and reflect on a set of questions that prompt participants to reflect on the past, assess the current ecosystem, and dream boldly about a future in which women and feminist political leaders thrive.

The exercise had five sections that included prompts to reflect on personal backgrounds, goals of the fund and its impact, best funding considerations, key beliefs and core values, and priorities for the future. On the next page are common key themes that emerged and suggested areas of consideration and focus for the future of Colmena Fund.



The group was extraordinary. I loved the safe, loving and feminist space you managed to build for us."

—Convening participant reflection from meeting evaluation



<i>Common Theme</i>	<i>Key Message</i>
Inclusive and Grassroots Focus	Multiple groups emphasized supporting smaller, grassroots organizations and marginalized communities.
Networking and Solidarity	The importance of creating and strengthening networks, both regionally and globally, was a recurring theme.
Capacity Building	Many groups highlighted the need for training, mentorship, and skill development for women in politics.
Sustainable and Flexible Funding	Long-term, flexible funding approaches were emphasized across several groups.
Narrative Building and Visibility	Multiple groups stressed the importance of creating and promoting feminist political narratives and increasing visibility for women leaders.
Security and Protection	Addressing violence against women in politics and providing security support was mentioned by several groups.
Local Context and Knowledge	The importance of understanding and respecting local contexts and involving local partners was emphasized.
Holistic Support	Many groups advocated for comprehensive support that goes beyond just funding, including infrastructure, resources, and convening opportunities.
Innovation and Adaptability	Several groups mentioned the need for innovative approaches and the ability to adapt to changing political landscapes.
Measurement and Impact	The need for clear goals, metrics, and ways to measure impact was noted by multiple groups. Monitoring and evaluation should be suited to partner capacity and not burdensome.

Potential Proposals on Opportunities and Partnerships

Following the discussions geared towards iterating ideas and strategy that were prompted by Colmena Fund, participants had the opportunity to engage in peer-led open space dialogues.

The activity involved participant-led discussions on various thematic areas proposed by the convenors and participants, including: Cultivating Solidarity and Community; Women Migrant Worker Protections and Future Collaborative Agendas; Building on Existing Initiatives; Measuring Impact; and Violence Against Women in Politics and Security. Below are takeaways from discussions:

Cultivating Solidarity and Community

<p>Insights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of supporting women's caucuses across party lines • Need to reflect on feminism and its manifestation in the region • Potential of youth engagement platforms
<p>Action Points</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support caucuses of women across party lines where possible • Generate spaces to reflect on feminism and its concrete manifestations in the region • Identify champions to share and connect with organizations responding to gender-based violence • Generate stories of feminist political leaders from the region, highlighting their positive experiences and challenges • Work with platforms for youth engagement (e.g., S. Korea's initiative for leaders under 39 and young voters)



Women Migrant Workers Protections and Future Collaborative Agendas

Insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for creating connections and raising awareness for women political leaders regarding the experiences of women migrant workers within origin countries and migrant-sending countries
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women political leaders becoming migrants through exile • Lack of understanding of migrant conditions at both domestic and international levels • Politicians' reluctance to take a gendered perspective in addressing migrant issues
Action Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange ideas and discussions among politicians from different countries to gain voter support • Implement training and mentorship programs for women in fields with less representation • Work on specific agendas related to women's and feminist and migrant worker protections

Building on Existing Initiatives

Insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most organizations are trying to do everything with limited resources • Need to balance supporting women inside and outside the system • Explore local ecosystem of philanthropy for sustainability
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bandwidth issues due to limited resources • Navigating party interests and funding risks • Sustainability without local philanthropy ecosystem • Women changing values once elected due to pressure



Building on Existing Initiatives

Questions Raised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to navigate party interests? • How to unlock local funding? • How to ensure sustainability?
Action Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build coalitions (need time to commit) • Conduct gender audits of parties • Connect and educate donors • Fund and build an ecosystem for the whole political life cycle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Pre-entry, governance, survival in the system, post-governance ◦ Organizations for each stage of the life cycle

Measuring Impact

Insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of feminist values and research methodologies • Existing knowledge and wisdom within the community • Importance of transparency in reporting and sustainable models of monitoring and evaluation
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing quantitative data with narratives • Determining who sets the indicators (donors, funds, or organizations) • Ensuring data collection does not harm • Measuring backlash and setbacks, not just positive outcomes • Avoiding stifling innovation through M&E
Questions Raised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to tell stories with numbers? • How can M&E set standards without inhibiting innovation?



Violence Against Women in Politics and Security

Insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Little discussion on mental wellbeing of politicians• Mental wellbeing of politicians globally is worse than first responders and police• Politicians need openness and creativity to address hard challenges
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor mental wellbeing of politicians, especially women• Tech-facilitated violence against politicians• Physical violence against candidates (e.g., 33 people killed in Mexican election)• Violence causing women to quit during and after elections
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Network women political leaders to share best practices• Implement Australian government's social media self-defense training• Develop wellbeing and resilience training for politicians• Create a public email chain to share information• Assess how violence is affecting work in the region





Conclusion: Gratitude and Commitment

Following two days of profound discussion and uplifting connections, the organizers and participants emerged with perceptive and applicable key thematic areas.

Participants emphasized the following areas for further consideration:

- Focus on grassroots and marginalized communities
- Develop strong solidarity networks
- Provide holistic support
- Implement flexible and sustainable funding models
- Prioritize capacity building
- Address safety, security and wellbeing
- Emphasize narrative building and visibility
- Adapt to local and regional contexts
- Support innovative measurement and impact strategies
- Consider supporting local and non-national elections

The enthusiasm, collaboration, and insights generated during the meeting were particularly reflective of the collective manifestations of diverse organizations and leaders that are working towards advancing feminist and women's political power. The participants were humbled to be in community with one another and found the shared moments and personal connection reaffirming and healing. However, this was in stark contrast to many of their

lived experiences and daily struggles as women political leaders and those communities that attended in support. It is this juxtaposition that fuels the field and transforms the everyday lives of women into extraordinary women's political leaders; and the purpose for Colmena Fund.

Acknowledgements

Colmena Fund is deeply grateful to all participants, including political leaders and representatives from various funds with a special appreciation to the facilitator Hermes Huang from InsightPact, Open Society Foundations for their financial support and contributions, and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Colmena Fund's Fiscal Sponsor.



Colmena fund
for Women's Political Power

