



# Mongolia's Self-Styled Female Parliamentary Candidates

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December 20, 2016

## **What can a study about women parliamentary candidates contribute to our understanding of democratic elections, gender transformation, and contemporary neoliberal self-making?**

Elections and electoral campaigns in particular, have penetrated the public and private spheres, and continue to shape new subjects and subjectivities. In addition to the neoliberal capitalist demand for self-entrepreneurship and self-renovation, elections in Mongolia further push the candidates to engage in an in-depth self-polishing that speaks to the gender and class identities of the country's political leadership. The comprehensive self-making into eligible parliamentary candidates is especially notable in case of female parliamentary candidates in Mongolia. That is because, unsurprisingly, women candidates must fight to gain recognition and respect in a society where the default politician is male, and where gender roles and identities continue to transform..

### **Self-polishing**

Since 2006, I have shadowed numerous female candidates for months leading up to as well as during the parliamentary elections of 2008 and 2012. During non-election times I also researched the impact of campaign preparations on everyday life.

Besides their formal campaign preparations, the female political candidates also engaged in long-term self-polishing and "self-developing" activities that were meant to shape them into fully "prepared" political candidates. "Self-development" was already a part of their high achieving career-centered lives even before they run for parliamentary seats. However, their efforts were also fueled by the 2007 parliament's repeal of the candidate quota that stated that all political parties must

have 30% women in their candidates' pool. The parliament gave no explanation for the repeal of the quota, although rumors in political circles speculated that there were not enough prepared female candidates to make up the 30% pool.



# АРДЧИЛСАН НАМ

*Иргэн бүрт Эрдэнийн хувь*



**Ламжавын**

**ГҮНДАЛАЙ**

**Цэдэвдамбын**

**ОЮУНГЭРЭЛ**



An election poster of four co-candidates marching on the main “square” of Mongolia’s capital city, Ulaanbaatar. Note the matching ties as well as the general style of the outfits, and the candidates’ body language. Oyungerel Tseveddambin

While dismayed at the repeal of the quota, many women intensified their preparations even if “prepared” was a rather elusive term. To cover all odds, they embarked on comprehensive makeovers, ranging from beautification to earning advanced degrees and learning foreign languages. Being prepared became synonymous with becoming their ideal selves. Women treated their minds and bodies as malleable entities and strived to (re)make themselves into highly attractive, charismatic, and *oyunlag* (intellectual) individuals. I translate a Mongolian word *oyunlag*, which literally means “with intellect” as “intellectual.” This is different from, although related to, *intellectual*, which implies social class.

“I need to recharge my brain, I am not ready [to compete] yet,” said an executive at a successful TV station who was leaving to study for an advanced degree abroad, and who was planning to return two years before the next election to set up her campaign. “Why do you think you are not ready?” I asked her, surprised at how earnest she was about her need for an intellectual makeover. Post-graduate diplomas have become a part of the candidates’ credentials. However, I rarely heard male candidates talking about their need for urgent intellectual revamp to strengthen their candidacy.

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Many women also attended international capacity-building workshops in order to meet particular global leadership standards. “These strategies do not really apply to the Mongolian case,” some women commented following workshops given in Mongolia in 2007 by Sara Simmons, a former director of strategy for Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s campaign later strategist for the McCain-Palin presidential campaign. Still, many women attended these kinds of workshops at home and abroad to sharpen their campaigning skills.

Retrospectively, these women were realizing that they were welcome to test their stamina, hard work, and perseverance in competing for parliamentary seats, but only by almost fully accepting the rules of the male-dominated game. Attempts to challenge gender bias, whether individually or on an institutional level via quota implementation, carried steep costs.

## Being intellectual

The Mongolian electorate ranks education (*bolovсроl*) as the number one criteria for voting for a female Member of Parliament (National Committee on Gender Equality, 2010). In many voter outreach meetings, I heard voters declare that it was necessary to elect *oyunlag* people, and that female candidates had to be *sheeten emegteichuud* (female intellectuals).

There are many ways of being intellectual. Intellectualness is not a trait associated exclusively with women, but because most women candidates capitalized on their professional and educational achievements more than on material resources, that they usually lacked, the electorate and the political parties also picked up their rhetoric. Many female candidates obtained degrees and certificates from Stanford, Yale, Harvard, and other top-ranking international universities in order to present themselves as intellectual candidates.



**A candidate (Burmaa Radnaa) getting her picture taken following her voter reach out meeting. She is surrounded by children in the constituency and her campaign workers dressed in outfits with her portraits and holding posters with her name and pictures. Ulaanbaatar (outskirts), Mongolia. Manduhai Buyandelger**

One of the quintessential ways to be intellectual is to write books, especially literature. One of my main interlocutors has written numerous books with each one expanding her voter base. First, she published a memoir about her student days in the US, then a conversational dictionary for tourists and hosts in the Mongolian countryside, and finally a sweeping historical novel about a community in rural Mongolia in the 1930s that found itself caught up in political violence. With each book she retooled herself as a writer and as a public individual. All of them sold well, but the last one, the novel, brought her nationwide acclaim. She used her book tours to gain popularity before official political campaigning began. In 2012, she completed her book tour just prior to the start of the electoral period and immediately launched her campaign while the public memory of her novel was still fresh. Proud of her success as an author, she also declared that she had taken no “dirty” money to finance her campaign—it was mainly financed by the money from her book sales.

There are also more nuanced ways of being intellectual, such as pointing out inconsistencies and loopholes in laws and decrees, showing an ability to measure and predict risks, winning difficult lawsuits, and responding effectively to attacks and accusations during campaign events. In Mongolia, these kinds of achievements and abilities are associated with *torgon uhaan* (silken intelligence), which tends to be naturalized as a distinctly womanly trait (men are thought to see the larger picture, but lack the precision and carefulness associated with “silken intelligence”).

### **Looking the part**

Appearance was at least as important as intellectfulness, to chagrin of some female candidates who cared less about their looks. Many of the women I met maintained meticulously polished appearances in public. Sharp western-style suits, dignified career dresses, and Mongolian *deel* (a robe with a sash) dominated the wardrobes of women candidates. Matching shoes and briefcases, expensive but understated jewelry sets, meticulous grooming and buffed skin, all implied class, status, and money. Some women added Botox, facelifts, and permanent make-up. Others took lessons to modify their “shrill” voices into more low-pitched and warmer voices to attract the electorate.



**A candidate's (Mönkhtuya, Budee) portrait-posters on one of the apartment buildings in her competing constituency. Manduhai Buyandelger**

It is important to note that during socialism in Mongolia many material markers of upper class femininity, such as imported cosmetics, fashionable clothes, accessories, and perfume, among others, were available only to the political elite, who could travel internationally. Today, fashion and cosmetics flood the Mongolian market—consumption-based femininity is no longer exclusively an upper class trait.

Popular images of femininity and masculinity have also changed. During socialism, the state controlled media featured professional and award-winning women workers. The post-socialist media favored sexualized images of beauty pageant contestants, trophy wives, and fashion models, and limited male images to politicians, rich businessmen, and entertainers. Gender ideology became explicitly misogynistic; it assumed fundamentally distinct feminine and masculine norms or ideals. Femininity became sexualized, commercialized, and image-centric.



Like all women, female political candidates were immersed in this new commoditized and sexualized femininity, and had to navigate an often hostile and discriminating environment of male politicians, media, and electorate. The problem for female candidates was that as women they must satisfy feminine norms— physical attractiveness and “gentle” manners, among others—in order to be accepted. At the same time, such feminine characteristics tended to distract the voters and the media from candidates’ professional and other achievements. Most women were in a double bind; they needed to cultivate their femininity, while also not allowing that femininity to override their achievements as professionals. Being indifferent to one’s looks was not just harmful for one’s candidacy—it was a transgression of dominant gender norms.

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The female candidates’ self-polishing must be understood as a careful and subtle maneuvering within the complexity of this transforming gender politics. They strived to achieve a femininity that would set them apart from beauty queens and trophy wives, one that would command attention and respect and create an ideal feminine political subject. The women candidates I studied used style to resist this oppressive order, not by symbolically breaking the rules and instituting their individual identity, but by displaying class and prominence through dignified styles and high status accessories.

As these self-polishing activities show, Mongolian democratic elections constitute a part of neoliberal governance, promoting as they do a continuous retooling of selves. Elections add to the shaping of gendered, classed, and political subjects who are open-ended, flexible, and who treat their bodies and minds as pliable and perfectible entities. In many nations it is the government and the corporate sector that promote self-development. In Mongolia, political elections further influence such engagements. Indeed, elections have become not just events to choose the country’s next political leadership, but ongoing ad hoc governing processes that shape gendered selves, subjectivities, and social life itself.

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