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Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels

Written statement*

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

I. Introduction

In this presentation, I aim to discuss women's progress with regard to political participation and decision-making at the local level. I shall explore the ways in which decentralized governance has facilitated – or not – women's access to political participation. My presentation is based on the findings of researchers supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), papers commissioned by IDRC which were prepared by Melissa Maclean and Jo Beall, as well as the policy recommendations from an International Conference on “Decentralization, Local Power and Women's Rights” held in Mexico City on 18-21 November 2008 by IDRC in collaboration with the Government of Mexico and in co-operation with a number of international agencies.

Much of the enthusiasm for decentralization and for enhancing the powers and responsibilities of local units of government is based on the idea that they are closer to the people that the state is supposed to serve. From such arguments it is often assumed that the global trend towards the decentralization of public services, resources and decision-making is also good for women.

The logic is as follows: prevailing gender relations in most parts of the world see women as being responsible for the domestic sphere, and thus women are more likely to be concerned with things homebound and local. As such, decentralization is often expected to increase women's participation and representation in local decision-making, and advance women's rights. The reality, however, is not so clear-cut.

First, localization has its limits and there is reason to believe that effective voice and distributive policies are better exercised at national level. Second, even where the benefits of decentralization can be clearly demonstrated, it is not guaranteed that these are extended to women. Third, ‘women’ are a heterogeneous constituency and even where decentralization advances gender equality, it is not necessarily extended to all categories of women with similar effect. Since 2004, 13 research teams in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, supported by the Women's Rights and Citizenship program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), have been interrogating these claims. In this presentation, I shall share highlights of the research findings from the different regions. I shall also explore some good practices and lessons learned, based on strategies that have actually increased women's participation in decision-making processes at the local level. And finally, I shall offer some reflections on the importance of connecting the global, the national and local levels to increase women's political participation in decision-making processes.

II. Background

Over the last two decades, decentralization has been changing government around the world. Reforms have granted sub-national authorities such as municipalities more autonomy and responsibility in areas that include water and sanitation, health, education, and local economic development. Often, these reforms are linked to new forms of political representation and participation—local elections, participatory budgeting, village development committees, and citizen oversight mechanisms—which are intended to make local government more accessible, accountable, and responsive.

Decentralization reforms are promoted as a means of deepening democracy and improving development. However, these processes have not been sufficiently gender sensitive, thus negating governments' global commitments and obligations, inter alia the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and relevant regional instruments that reaffirm gender equality, including women's full and equal participation and representation in public life.

IDRC has supported research projects on “Decentralization and Women's Rights” which were as diverse as the researchers and the places where they were carried out. University-based researchers in South Africa, civil society activists in India, and a former municipal councillor in El Salvador were among the researchers selected for IDRC support. The diversity of decentralization reforms and contexts makes having detailed studies on local experiences especially important. However, some experiences turned out to be widely shared.

III. Does decentralization foster women's participation in decision making processes?

Some decentralization experts and women's rights activists argue that it is easier for women to become involved in local government than at the national level because local issues and institutions are smaller in scale and closer to home. But the IDRC-supported research showed that it can be as hard at the local level as it is at the national level, for women to gain access to decision-making bodies and to ensure their needs and opinions are taken into account. In fact, it can be harder.

In South Africa, for example, the research team found that conservative local politics made it difficult for women to get elected. Moreover, gains in women's representation at the local level also depended on national initiatives such as the African National Congress party's decision to introduce equal representation for women on all their party lists.

In South Africa, national gender policies ensure that women take part in local projects and that certain funds are allocated for projects to meet women's practical needs in areas such as water, childcare, and access to credit. But researchers found that women's involvement in these projects was often linked to their traditional domestic roles, that their labour participation was often sought because it was cheaper than men's, and that although they were involved in project steering committees, they rarely held leadership positions. Few municipalities used the projects to address strategic gender issues such as domestic violence and barriers to women's political participation.

The research also showed that women's participation in local government often reinforces their traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers, rather than helping them to gain more influence over the decisions that affect them. In the southern Indian state of Kerala, women occupy more than one-third of local government seats due to the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments which reserved one third of all local government seats to women throughout India. Researchers there identified a number of “success stories”—including women originally elected to reserved seats who went on to contest and win general seats, but they concluded this did not necessarily translate into political influence.

Most of the locally elected women interviewed in Kerala saw themselves as social workers whose role is to distribute resources to meet people's basic needs. Rarely do they occupy powerful positions or move on to politics at higher levels. “The new spaces,” says the Kerala research team, “which held out the promise of political empowerment for women, seem to be reinforcing dominant gender norms.” Leaders of the male-dominated political parties show little interest in increasing the number of women in local government or expanding the scope of their participation.

IV. The importance of quotas

Many of the research projects found that quotas for women were the key to securing a significant presence of women in municipal councils, local water committees, and other local decision-making bodies. But quotas are not enough to turn women's presence into influence on decision-making. "Quotas," the Nepal research team found, "have provided spaces for women to participate However, their participation appears to be only at the level of numeric representation since both men and women ... tended to think of women's participation in terms of physical presence and attendance" more than in terms of "influencing the decision-making process."

In Pakistan, where local government reform mandated 33% representation of women, most of the 345 elected female councillors interviewed turned out to be "proxies"—selected and controlled by a male relative, husband, *Nazim* (local government chief), or landlord. According to a councillor in Rawalpindi, the city next to Islamabad: "The women elected in the union council work as rubber stamps.... Women are unable to do any work.... They are compelled to vote for the parties according to the will of their clan chiefs." Under such circumstances, their capacity to stand up for women's specific needs and rights is limited.

The researchers concluded that minimal conditions such as gender quotas should be introduced where they do not already exist, and expanded and given teeth where they do. The threshold could be raised to 50% and the national government could sanction local governments that fail to meet them. Rules establishing gender quorums — requiring that a minimum number of women be present before a decision can be made — should also be established to ensure that women representatives are not left out when important decisions are taken. And women's participation should be made mandatory on budget and finance committees, where women's involvement tends to be very rare.

Still, the researchers concluded that more than rules and regulations are required. Raising male awareness about women's political representation and participation is also crucial. Resistance to women's involvement in public life means that even when women do gain access to councils or local participatory bodies, they may not feel comfortable speaking out, they may be prevented from doing so, or men simply may not listen to them.

In South Africa, researchers found that, "senior council structures remain largely resistant to accommodating women's interests, and women councillors have experienced hostility and ridicule as they attempt to raise gender issues." In Nigeria, one woman shared her experience during a focus group discussion: "I went for councillorship in my own ward and discovered that in these things women are men's followers. Whatever music they play, women have to follow and dance to the music. Everything is manipulated, high-jacked, and handled by men."

V. Some success stories and good practices

Despite formidable challenges, many women are being elected to local government and are getting involved in local development committees and other participatory institutions. Researchers in South Africa reported that large numbers of women attend planning meetings "despite active discouragement from local elites." And women elsewhere expressed enthusiasm for the opportunities decentralization provided them to work in public, gain new skills and experience, and help other women.

In Ecuador, in four small municipalities led by left-of-centre and indigenous parties intent on promoting local participatory democracy, researchers found that women had made significant inroads in getting into local office and ensuring their participation in local planning. The Ecuador case illustrated what can be accomplished when a political party open to gender equity is in power. But in the town of Nabón, which had several woman councillors and a woman mayor, councillor Magali Quezada told researchers that she and others, when dealing with men, had to “speak loudly and put up with their jokes. They resisted having a woman in charge.”

The research carried out by UNNATI, an NGO in Rajasthan, India, looked at factors that help or hinder women’s participation in local government. The research team asked women councillors what kind of training they needed to become better advocates for women’s needs and rights. The councillors, many of whom have little formal education, said they wanted training sessions that are frequent, short, and conducted in local languages. They also wanted sessions on issues that are important to women in their communities, such as land encroachment, child marriage, and violence against women.

Many of the projects highlighted the importance of mobilizing civil society to support women’s access to decision-making at the local level. The national gender institutions and policies that helped local women benefit from decentralization in South Africa, for example, were created in response to pressure from national women’s movements during the post-apartheid transition in the mid-1990s. But the current weakness of the women’s movement in South Africa has left women with little support to advance further at the local level.

In El Salvador and Honduras, pressure from women’s groups in hundreds of municipalities led to the creation of gender offices that administer projects for women, monitor gender mainstreaming, or work on issues such as domestic violence. But national women’s organizations were largely unaware of this activity on the ground. When the project team presented national feminist leaders with a map showing where local women were actively lobbying for attention to gender issues, their reaction was: “We had no idea!” Some national women’s groups have now launched efforts to link up with local groups working on municipal issues.

Changing the way both men and women think about women’s representation and participation is a complex, long-term process. But many of the researchers from these 13 projects agree that if decentralization is really going to make local government responsive to women, supporting actions are needed to help change mindsets and behaviour, including gender awareness training for men in councils and bureaucracies.

A district council member in the town of Badin, in south-eastern Pakistan, told researchers about the problems she faced in dealing with male colleagues, who often withhold information and resources. But she remains positive about the benefits of decentralization. “The local government system is very good and we are happy with it,” she said. “Women are allowed to have opportunities to work ..., to come out of their houses and work among and along with men, and to exercise some freedom. I never thought of myself coming out ... and being among men to speak for our rights in the council or to go to different places to get our work done. Only this system has ... enabled the women to come up and speak, become active and participate.”

VI. Linkages and Dialogues between the Global and the Local

It can be helpful to identify those connections between the local, the national and the global levels that can have an influence on women’s participation in decision-making. For example,

according to Kristen Sample, in Latin America in recent years there has been an increase in both the number and percentage of women in politics - embodied by the rise to power of two female presidents, Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Cristina Fernandez in Argentina. Their election has, in turn, generated a renewed debate on the state of women in politics today in the region. The reality, perhaps surprising, is that the progress of women in assuming elected office in Latin America varies considerably: between and even within countries, nationally and sub-nationally. Nevertheless with 21 per cent of women sitting in national parliaments the region has one of the highest rates of women parliamentarians in the world.

Moreover, in the region new global leaderships have had an impact on women's movements. Today, Latin American feminists frequently point to Spain as an example of how comprehensive government commitment can help close the gender-gap. Spain's Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, a self-proclaimed "feminist", is doing more than talking the talk. Under his leadership, Spain has promoted parity in the cabinet (nine women to eight men), electoral lists and corporate boards. Just as importantly, the Zapatero government has moved beyond these legislative measures to affect cultural norms and mores, as evidenced by the public-service announcements aimed at ending domestic violence and at reminding men of their responsibility to do an equal share of housework.

VII. Policy Recommendations

Finally, it is important to highlight the policy recommendations that emerged from an international conference on "Decentralization, Local Power and Women's Rights", held by IDRC and the Government of Mexico in Mexico City in November 2008. These recommendations bring a women's rights and gender equality perspective to the global agenda on participation in decision-making processes at the local level.

The policy recommendations include the following:

- Implement mechanisms to raise women's awareness of their democratic rights so that they can exercise them through thoughtful, independent and strategic use of the ballot to effect change.
- National and sub-national governments to introduce or expand quotas and reservations for women in all institutions of decentralized governance, including local bureaucracies, and implement mechanisms to ensure women's active and effective presence in leadership roles within them.
- Political parties operating locally to promote gender-inclusive internal democracy through quotas or other mechanisms, and promote women in key decision-making roles, and national and sub-national governments promote gender inclusiveness within political parties through quotas, incentive systems, or other mechanisms.
- Select local electoral systems (such as proportional representation or ward systems) with reference to their impacts on the election of women, undertaking electoral reforms aimed at increasing effective and diverse women's representation.
- Ensure state funding for political parties and candidates is equitably distributed to women candidates.
- Implement mechanisms to facilitate women's effective political participation, such as quorum rules requiring a minimum presence of women in decision-making sessions, and women-only forums that are clearly linked to mixed forums.