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From Representation to Participation: Women in Local Government*

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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.

The last decade has witnessed a rising concern with enhancing the representation and participation of women in politics at every level – from the local to the national. The reason for this is the obvious democratic deficit encountered in even the more advanced democracies, where the representation of women in national assemblies has increased only marginally from 9 per cent in 1995 to 16 per cent in 2004 – a rate of just 0.5 per cent per year – considerably lower than the `critical mass' of 30 per cent envisaged at Beijing. This paper will argue that *women's representation* and *women's effective participation*, though related, are distinct issues; that representation does not necessarily translate into participation; and that the relationship between representation and participation is both complex and contingent. Such an understanding must inform the setting of objectives.

Women's Representation and Participation in Local Governance

All manner of arguments have been made justifying the desirability of women's participation in democratic institutions in general and in institutions of local democracy in particular. However, not everyone who endorses the objective of enhancing women's participation would also endorse any and every argument that justifies this objective. It has, for instance, been argued that the criteria of eligibility in politics at the local level are less stringent and even that local politics provide a suitable space for political apprenticeship[1]. Such arguments are obviously patronising about women, and unabashedly cast doubts on their political competence. Another assertion, commonly encountered, is that local politics is about issues that concern women's daily lives – as the chief users of water, waste disposal, health clinics and other social services – implying that participation in local government is an extension of women's involvement in the civic issues facing their communities. There may also be an implied suggestion here that national level politics are about issues more distant from (and perhaps incomprehensible to?) women. Yet others suggest that it is easier for women, given their constraints in terms of household and childcare responsibilities, to participate in public life at a level more proximate to them. While practical concerns are undoubtedly important, such arguments seem to convey the ideological flavour of patriarchy.

A more convincing argument for representation is rooted in the conviction that, unless all sections of society – whether women, or racial or religious minorities, or groups disadvantaged in other ways – are represented in its legislative bodies, their interests will not be articulated and they will suffer from policy neglect.[2] Democratic history and practice quite clearly demonstrate that even democratic institutions, based as they are on the principle of one-person one-vote, are blind to cultural or gender difference and as such do not spontaneously provide any guarantee that women's interests, or indeed those of other marginalised or excluded groups, will find effective representation. If therefore we aim at tangible policy outcomes that take into account the special needs and interests of women, we need effective representation, which in turn may involve making a case for special arrangements – such as safeguarded quotas – for their

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[1] Annette Evertzen (2001: 6) " Gender and Local Governance" SNV: Netherlands Development Organization. Also see Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay (2005:11) "Decentralisation and Gender Equity in South Asia: Issue paper for IDRC". Mimeo.

[2] The underlying assumption, of course, is that only members of a particular group can represent the interests of that group, and this is obviously a point that can be debated.

representation. It is thus because of the imperfections in the way in which representative institutions actually work, that the case has been made for replacing the `politics of ideas' – rooted in the contest of rival political visions –by the `politics of presence'[3], effectuated through safeguarded quotas.

If this is the basis on which the case for women's representation in general rests, what is the specific case for women's representation in institutions of *local* democracy? Two types of claims are at stake here. The first claim emphasises the normative appeal of local democracy, which assumes that the quality of political participation, and therefore of public life itself, will be substantively transformed when people foregather to collectively debate and deliberate on issues of common concern, and are provided with decision-making powers to give effect to their shared concerns. Local political institutions would also, *pace* Mill, act as "a school of political capacity", making citizens capable of genuine and informed participation. Another weaker and more instrumentalist, argument for democratic decentralisation sees it as making possible decision-making that is informed by and responsive to local interests and local knowledge, as opposed to centralised decision-making which can only provide inappropriately uniform solutions to diverse local problems.

If democratic decentralisation is a desirable form of institutional design, the second claim – that women should find equitable, if not equal, representation at this level of democracy – rests on the argument, already discussed, of the `politics of presence', so that the better representation of women should result in superior policy outcomes that specifically address women's needs and interests. However, it needs to be emphasized that *representation is only the first, necessary but by no means sufficient, condition for effective participation.* The distinction between representation and participation is important for the one does not necessarily entail the other. Moreover, while it is somewhat easier to legislate for representation[4], it is an infinitely more complex task to create the conditions for effective participation. At least part of the unfulfilled project of the movement to enhance women's representation has been the mistaken assumption that the translation of representation into participation would be fluid and almost automatic.

Given this distinction, it becomes important to (a) examine the institutional mechanisms by which women's representation is enhanced or inhibited; *and* (b) explore the conditions, both institutional and social, under which women are able to participate effectively in local government. This means ensuring not only that women have access to these institutions, but also that they are able to effectively participate in them, and are in a position to influence decision-making in a way that can be assessed through the policy outcomes that ensue from these processes. Participation thus has an additional role in empowering women vis-à-vis their subordination in the larger social framework of patriarchal gender relations. It must of course be remembered that the institutional and social conditions that enhance – or inhibit – representation and participation are to be found in the institutional domain of not only state institutions but also

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[3] Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

[4] Even legislation is not always easy, as the case of the Women's Reservation Bill – which proposes 33 per cent reservation for women in parliament and state assemblies, and whose passage has been repeatedly blocked for ten years now – shows.

civil society, and not only in the materiality of political economy but also in the ideological complexities of culture.

A. Representation: Institutional mechanisms

As far as mechanisms of representation, sponsored by the state, are concerned, it is now fairly well established that it is only in countries where there are quotas enabling women's representation that the presence of women in institutions of local governance exceeds 15 per cent (the average, as mentioned at the outset, for women's presence at the level of national assemblies worldwide). However, there is no uniformity of design or practice as far as quotas are concerned. The variety of quota arrangements, and their comparative weaknesses and strengths, are briefly listed below:

- In India, one-third of all seats in the institutions of local governance – in the rural areas, the *panchayats* at three levels, from the village to the district and, in the urban areas, the municipal councils and corporations – are reserved for women, as are one-third of the positions of Chairperson at every level. In rural areas alone, this provision has had a truly revolutionary impact, as it brings approximately one million women into the *panchayats* at any point of time. However, the provision for the rotation (between constituencies) of the reserved seats means that these change from one election to the next. This generally works to the detriment of women and their opportunity to craft a political career as – even if they have performed effectively in their first term – they are unable to reap the benefits of these achievements in the next election, when they are generally nudged aside by men who are eager to corner these positions.

- In Uganda, the Local Government Act of 1997 also reserves 30 per cent of seats in the local councils for women. However, this is not a proportion of the existing seats, but rather an *additional* number of seats, over and above the existing number. New wards are created for women by clubbing together two or three existing wards, and this space is reserved exclusively for competition among women. Not only this, the elections to the women's seats are held a fortnight *after* the general elections to the local councils, and it was observed in the 1998 elections, that election fatigue actually resulted in an extremely low voter turnout which could not be improved despite repeating the electoral process. The chief objection to the Ugandan system of quotas is obviously that it compartmentalises the election to local councils and accords women an inferior and add-on position both in the structuring of the councils, as well as in the sequencing of the election process.

- A third (and not very dissimilar to the Ugandan model) type of quota prevails in Bangladesh, where the Union Parishad (the institution of rural local government) encompasses nine wards, in each of which the electorate elects a `general' (usually male) representative. In each Union Parishad, three additional seats are provided, covering three wards each, and these are reserved for women, which has increased women's representation in these bodies to approximately 20 per cent. The area for which a woman representative is responsible is thus three times the area which a man represents. The budgetary support for men and women – which comes entirely from the central

government's Annual Development Plan – does not take into account this difference in the area for which male and female representatives have responsibility. Most importantly, reforms regarding one-third representation for women at the two higher levels – the sub-district and the district – have not been implemented.

- In Namibia, Proportional Representation with quotas (both formal and informal) for women is used in national and local elections, while the simple plurality system is used for the regional elections to the upper house of the national parliament. The election results show an interesting contrast: the proportion of women elected at the local level was 32 per cent in 1992, going up to 41 per cent in 1998. At the national level, with formal quotas being used by SWAPO (the chief political party), the numbers of women in parliament went up from 8 per cent in 1989 to 29 per cent in 2003. By contrast, in the regional elections to the national parliament's upper house, with no quotas and a simple plurality electoral system, the percentage of elected women in 1992 was 3 per cent going up to a mere 4 per cent in 1998.

- In Pakistan, too, there are quotas, leading to the representation of a fair number of women – e.g., 16 per cent in the North West Frontier Province – but these women are (a) nominated rather than elected and (b) essentially token representatives. Further, there is a wide variation in the extent of reservation, from 50 per cent at the Union (village) level, to five and ten seats respectively (approximately 15 per cent) at the tehsil and district levels.[5] This only serves to re-emphasise the point that it is misleading to judge the matter by just looking at the percentages of women representatives in local bodies.

What then does the evidence suggest about ways of enhancing women's representation, whether through quotas in councils or political parties? The following points emerge as central:

- The most effective way of ensuring representation is thus through quotas in local council elections, though quotas can be designed in ways that undermine effective representation.
- Quotas should be filled by election, rather than by nomination, even if this is disguised as election.
- Quotas are less effective when they apply to seats that are added on to the existing number of seats, rather than being a proportion of existing seats.
- The electoral system is relevant to the representation of women. Proportional representation, with party lists, for instance, is more likely to generate superior representational outcomes than the plurality system based on single-member constituencies. Ward based systems are considered to be more effective than at-large electoral systems, because women are more likely to be known to their constituents through their community work.
- Further, the way in which constituencies are divided up among candidates is important. If the constituency overlaps with other constituencies represented by other members – as in Bangladesh and Namibia – then the representative role of even elected women is clearly undermined.

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[5] The Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre (2000: 144) *Human Development in South Asia 2000: The Gender Question.* Oxford University Press, Karachi.

- The role played by political parties is relevant as parties tend to act as gatekeepers to women's entry into politics. In South Africa, the application of the quota in the list of candidates by the African National Congress and other political parties, encouraged by a provision in the Municipal Structures Act, has led to a demonstrable increase in the number of women elected to the local councils.[6] In the Philippines, the party list system guarantees quotas for women, which actually led to the formation and electoral success of a women's party list organisation, the Abanse! Pinay party, committed to working for women's rights and welfare.[7]
- Following from the above, the engendering of party executives is a related issue of some importance, and it is curious that this debate is generally restricted to national party executives, with very little thought given to lower levels (such as state/provincial/district) of party organization. It is arguable that when local party organizations are more gendered, the possibilities of local councils being gendered are also higher.
- Financial support for election campaigns and for elected women representatives would make it easier for women to contest elections (especially where there are no quotas) and to perform their representational tasks effectively.

B. Participation:

B.1. Procedural challenges and institutional responses

Getting elected to local councils is only the first challenge faced by women in local government. There are a host of other *procedural and institutional challenges* that they encounter in the way in which these institutions actually work. In India, for instance, innovative ways have been found to exclude women by distorting the parliamentary procedures that are supposed to govern the functioning of the *panchayats*. The No-Confidence Motion is one such procedure that has been widely and frequently used to vote out duly elected women chairpersons of *panchayats* and replace them by individuals more acceptable to the dominant elites of the village. However, many women who were unfairly removed in this way have appealed to courts, and have won their cases, returning to claim their rightful place. Some states have responded to this problem by putting in place mechanisms to obviate the no-confidence motion, such as disallowing it for the first year after the constitution of the *panchayat*. Another procedural distortion for excluding women has been the manipulation of the requirement of quorum, as when a meeting is cancelled for lack of quorum, quietly rescheduled without proper notice to women members, and eventually conducted without them. In the Indian context, the most critical institutional constraint remains the inadequate devolution of powers and finances to the local bodies, rendering them largely powerless and ineffectual.

B.2. Social Constraints

While mechanisms can, in principle, be devised to address institutional constraints, *social*

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[6] UNRISD (2005: 195): *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World.* Geneva.
[7] Jean Drage, *Women in Local Government in Asia and the Pacific: A comparative analysis of thirteen countries.* (Report for ESCAP, 2001: 34)

constraints are clearly harder to legislate away. The ubiquity of historically entrenched patriarchal practices is obviously the most formidable social constraint on women's participation. This explains in part the fact that women who enter representative bodies generally belong to families of politicians, and may be surrogates for the men who cannot themselves contest due to the reservation. That family political connections help women at every step from the decision (not always an independent decision taken by women themselves) to contest, to getting successfully elected has, in India, been found to be true not only of the rural areas, but also in urban areas, as a recent study of municipal councils in four big cities in India shows.[8] In the presence of quotas, thus, social constraints can impact representation only partially and in terms of the *quality* of representation. However, they bear much more heavily on the possibilities of effective participation.

Following election, leaving the private and circumscribed space of the home – with all its responsibilities – for a public space is the next big challenge. The inequitable division of labour within the household, and the fact that political participation might imply a neglect of household and childcare responsibilities, is a deterrent. The internalisation of generations of gender bias is reflected in the under-confidence of women in forming and expressing opinions in the proceedings of local councils, though they do often become aware of the manifest discrimination against them in decision-making bodies.

Other forms of social disadvantage – e.g., caste disadvantage in India – tend to compound the hold of patriarchy. Women belonging to the scheduled castes have suffered discrimination on grounds of caste, and have often been encouraged to stay at home rather than attend council meetings. Being unlettered is also a hindrance to participation as, unable to read agenda papers or minutes of meetings, women simply receive these in their homes to affix their signature or thumb impression, as the case may be. However, one positive consequence of this has been the recognition of illiteracy as a handicap, and women representatives are found to have devoted considerable energy to promoting education for the girl child, so that their daughters are not disadvantaged in the same way.

C. Civil society interventions and Institutional Innovations

Given these constraints, both institutional-procedural as well as social, what are the institutional mechanisms and civil society interventions that help to make women more effective in their actual participation, and exercise real influence on decision-making? Training programmes for capacity-building by governmental as well as non-governmental organizations have been a much-favoured mode of intervention. Though such programmes can be well-designed and even effect a degree of improvement, this form of intervention needs constant repetition with every new round of election. In China, while there is an emphasis on pre-election training for women, there is no training in political skills after they have been elected.

Even in respect of training, the most impressive results are to be found where training programmes and capacity-building efforts by NGOs are designed to synergise with horizontal

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[8] Archana Ghosh and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (2005) *Democratization in Progress: Women and Local Politics in Urban India.* Delhi: Tulika Books.

networking with women's and other grassroots organizations at the local level. In India, for instance, some striking instances of effective collective action by women members of *panchayats* have been enabled by the links forged with the Mahila Mandal (local women's organization) and also with Self-Help Groups. Though Self-Help Groups (as micro-credit societies) have a rather different raison d'etre, it has been seen that these are the first `public' arenas that ordinary women actually enter, and where – given that these are all-women forums – they acquire the initial confidence to articulate their opinions.

The efforts of civil society organizations are generally concentrated on creating awareness, and facilitating the creation of forums where this can be done without the inhibiting factors that otherwise constrain the presence and participation of women. In Uganda, for instance, civil society organizations like KANIVA have intervened to ensure that meetings are held in the daytime rather than in the evening (when women find it more difficult to attend); that children can be brought along; and that workshops are organized in the vernacular. In general, it is true that in most countries, the presence of a women's movement helps to strengthen the participation of women. In Brazil, this has been seen in the effectiveness of Municipal Budgeting Forums – which have become important forums for raising women's issues – in which women are represented to the extent of 60 per cent, and the leadership is often provided by members of the women's movement.

Two innovative modes of civil society intervention that have proved effective in the Indian context may be mentioned. The first is a model which works through the training of women who are called Panchayat Sakhis[9] (friends). These women, generally graduates, are recruited and trained so that they have a fair knowledge of the laws, rules, procedures of *panchayat* functioning, as well as of the various anti-poverty programmes available, and how these might be accessed. These women in turn motivate and empower the elected women representatives so that they become more effective in the performance of their tasks. They do so by providing the requisite information, by accompanying them to *panchayat* meetings and assisting them there, and in educating the men in their families about the value of women's participation. With this support, women representatives are helped to withstand pressure from rural elites as well as the local bureaucracy; to assert their rights of participation in public life; make *panchayats* more responsive to women's needs; and learn how to mobilize financial resources for local development needs.

A second innovation is the creation of innovative institutions such as federations and associations which bring together elected women representatives across several villages and blocks in a few districts, with a view to enhancing their strength as a collective. The implicit assumption here is that, since the *panchayat* as a self-contained unit, cannot be rendered more responsive to the needs of women, linking representatives who belong to these groups would help to more effectively advance their collective interests *qua* women. These federations have also attracted the involvement of women who were previously elected representatives but are no longer formally a part of the local councils. Some of them may have contested the election a second time, or contested election to an unreserved seat or at the next higher level, and won or lost that election, but they all remain committed to the task of leveraging the collective strength

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[9] This is an innovation designed by Prakriti, a Gandhian NGO working with women on livelihood and gender equality issues.

of elected women. In interviews, many women claim that, if they returned to their previously cloistered existence, it would be a shameful waste of the experience and knowledge that they gained in one term as elected representatives. They feel they have a useful role to play in passing on their expertise to currently elected representatives and to contribute to the pool of political talent for future elections.[10]

D. Effective Participation: Does it Engender Development?

There is evidence to suggest that, despite the social and institutional constraints, the participation of women in local councils can be empowering. The developmental impacts of such participation have clearly been seen in the issues prioritised by women. In the Indian context, women have worked towards getting drinking water, sanitation, housing, schools[11] (especially for girl children), primary health centres, day care facilities for children, smokeless cooking stoves, and so forth. In what may well be a uniquely Indian concern, it has been found that women privilege, even over all the subjects mentioned above, their fight against male alcoholism. This is obviously a gendered issue, as it impacts the lives of women in many ways, not least domestic violence and forcibly skewed patterns of household expenditure.

This cannot however encourage us to altogether ignore the evidence about women in politics who prefer not to emphasise gender and gender issues unduly, choosing to contribute to discussions on women's issues only as and when necessary.[12] While this is generally more true of higher levels of politics, a recent study of urban women councillors in India has shown that they are embarrassed about raising issues that can be interpreted as addressing a female constituency, and prefer to participate in debates on issues that are broadly seen as gender-neutral.[13]

That developmental outcomes also have emancipatory impacts can be illustrated by citing the example of many women in India, who have recognised their own lack of literacy as a grave handicap affecting their effective participation in local councils, and so have sought to ensure that their daughters get an education. There have even been some examples of girls attending school, and then teaching their mothers after school hours.

It is often argued that one way of making women's participation more effective is to train them in gender budget analysis. The success of such a strategy is clearly contingent on prior levels of awareness, information and literacy among women. As such, it would differ substantially from one country context to another. It has apparently worked well in Brazil, but it is harder to see it being as successful in India or Uganda.

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[10] These two paragraphs draw upon a recent study by this author, of the social justice outcomes of specific local governance programmes, in three Indian states. This work is part of a multi-country study, currently under preparation, co-ordinated by Professor John Gaventa of the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex.
[11] That this is similar to the evidence from many other countries is confirmed by the findings of Drage, op. cit., a report based on country studies, prepared for ESCAP, 2001.
[12] Gisela Geisler: "Troubled Sisterhood: Women and Politics in Southern Africa: Case Studies from Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana" in *African Affairs*. Vol. 94, No. 377, p. 574.
[13] Ghosh and Lama-Rewal, op. cit.

Despite the wide variation, across country experiences, in the legal and political framework, as also in the degree and quality of effective participation by women in local government, some salient points emerge:

- The importance of political parties in sponsoring women's candidates in larger numbers and providing them with the necessary institutional incentives and financial support to contest elections, as well as training to perform their representational functions effectively.
- The significant role that civil society organizations can play in networking elected women representatives through associations and forums that can help them leverage their collective strength to effect policy change.
- The developmental issues prioritised by women across at least the developing world suggest a striking similarity, from livelihood issues to those of housing, sanitation, education and health.
- The fundamental importance of greater gender awareness for both women and men, as patriarchal practices continue to constitute the biggest obstacle to the effective participation of women in local government.

From Representation to Participation:

The efforts deployed in ensuring equitable representation for women in decision-making bodies implicitly assume that this would be an adequate mechanism to guarantee their participation in these institutions. Since, moreover, representation can be enhanced through legal and institutional means, such efforts have been mainly concerned with quotas and the design of electoral systems.

This paper has sought to argue that while participation is obviously contingent upon representation, it would be a mistake to see representation as an end in itself. It is tempting to assume that better representation will guarantee higher participation. However, the evidence clearly shows (a) that even legally-mandated quotas and mechanisms ostensibly designed to enhance the representation of women can be easily undermined by elements of the institutional design itself; and (b) that the higher numerical presence of women in representative bodies alone cannot ensure their more effective participation in these bodies.

Effective participation cannot be legislated. It involves the creation of a political, social and cultural environment in which women acquire the awareness, information base and confidence to articulate their concerns, and an institutional environment that is receptive and responsive to such articulations. This arguably requires more committed and sustained initiatives by political parties and civil society organisations. Such interventions need to be innovative but also sensitive to the particularity of social context, because – despite the many shared attributes of patriarchy – what works in Brazil may not work in India or Namibia. As such, while laws and institutions can indeed create the conditions for representation, political parties and civil society – and especially women's organizations and the women's movement – have an important role to play in creating the conditions for effective participation.