



Chapter 12

Decentralization and gender equality

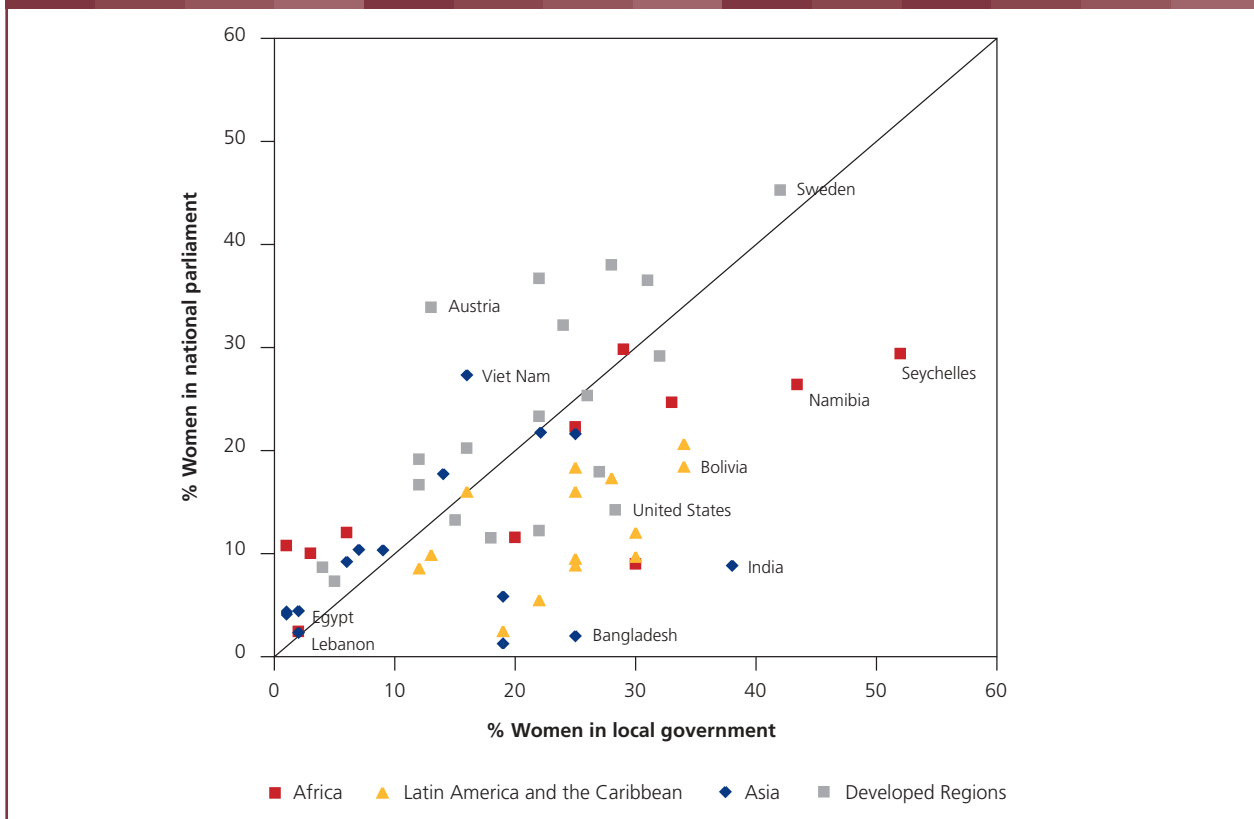
Since the 1990s, an important focus of governance reform has been the strengthening of local government by the decentralization of powers, resources and responsibilities to municipal councils and other locally administered bodies. The intention is to improve the quality and efficiency of services, strengthen fiscal management, enhance private sector development and increase local participation in decision-making processes.¹ Decentralization is expected to produce these outcomes because, since government will be nearer to them, citizens will take a closer interest in how their taxes are spent, and will subject to closer scrutiny the actions of their local representatives than they do those who disappear to the capital, holding them accountable to local needs.

This part of the reform agenda has been more open than others to the active participation of women, both as elected local councillors and as the clients of local government services. Women generally, as well as low-income and other socially marginal groups, are expected to benefit from the accountability and service delivery improvements that government in close proximity should provide. This is particularly relevant where social programmes of importance to disadvantaged groups are to be developed and managed locally—programmes such as those for health outreach, primary schooling, employment and income generation, slum redevelopment, and low-cost water and sanitation services.

Local government is also regarded as a significant political apprenticeship arena for women. Barriers to their entry—such as the need to travel and spend time away from home, a large disposable income, a reasonable level of education, experience

of political competition, and social connections—are lower at the local level. Local government is also regarded as appealing to women participants because of the focus on basic community services; women's engagement in informal community management is believed to make them attractive as local planners and managers.² Institutional innovations to broaden local participation in decision making, such as new participatory budgeting arrangements in Brazil and elsewhere, can also give women more incentive and better opportunities to engage in public debate.

The 1990s saw a number of legal and constitutional innovations around the world designed to enhance women's participation in local government; these included quotas and other measures to bring women into local office. These actions were supported and promoted by the International Union of Local Authorities, which in 1998 issued a Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government to encourage national support for affirmative action at the local level. The implication to be derived from analysing some of these experiences is that specific institutional engineering is indeed needed both to encourage women's participation in local government, and to make local governments accountable to female constituents. Women's participation in local government will not make its institutions more responsive to women's needs unless measures are put in place to counteract their capture by patriarchal elites.

Figure 12.1 Women in local government and national parliaments, 2004

Sources: UCLG 2003; Drage 2001; Svava 2003; OSKa 2002; Namibian 2004; Evertzen 2001; UN Statistical Division 2004.

THE PREVALENCE OF WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

It is not possible to obtain globally comparable data on women's participation in local government. The International Union of Local Authorities does not offer such data; there is such wide variation in the demarcation of subnational governments that they are barely comparable. Nevertheless, using self-reported country data from a 2003 survey conducted by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), a global network supporting inclusive local government, a partial impression of the current proportions of women in local government can be obtained (see figure 12.1).

This data shows that with the exception of Latin America, in no region of the world is there a consistently higher proportion of women in local councils than in national parliaments. The survey found that the average proportion of women in local councils for the 52 countries reporting was just 15 per cent³—no different from the global average of women in national parliaments; and that in leadership positions, the proportions of women were even lower: for instance, 5 per cent of mayors of Latin American municipalities are women.⁴ In many of the cases where there are more women in local than in national government, this is because quotas or other affirmative action provisions have been applied locally, but not, or not to the same extent, at the national level. This is the case for Namibia, Uganda, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, France and many Latin American countries.

The implication of this data is that local government is not necessarily, or has yet to become, the attractive and positive arena for women's participation that has been assumed. It may even be the case, contrary to conventional thinking, that women actually face greater obstacles to political engagement at the local than national levels in some contexts because of the intensity of local patriarchal norms.

COUNTRY EXPERIENCES OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Most of the countries with measures in place to promote women's presence in national parliaments have related measures at the local government level. Some states have used the local level for experimentation before applying affirmative action at the national level. Namibia's 1992 Local Authorities Act required that, depending on the size of the local authority, between one-third to one-half of candidates in local elections be women; the success of this measure led subsequently to voluntary quotas in some parties at the national level.⁵

In other contexts, local-level affirmative action has been something of an afterthought both for national administrations and for the women's movement, because so much attention was focused on improving women's rate of participation in national assemblies. In South Africa, for example, the relatively poor results for women candidates in the first local government elections prompted civil society action and legislative changes to boost their engagement in future rounds. Even though women's activism had been strongest at local levels during the anti-apartheid struggle, democratization drew many local women activists into national government, weakening their local participation.⁶

The case for affirmative action measures at local levels is best made by women's poor electoral performance in local and other subnational elections lacking such measures. In Namibia, contrasting outcomes are evident in different electoral systems. For both local council and national elections, a proportional representation (PR) system is used, with both formal and informal quotas of female candidates. For the regional elections

for the upper chamber, the National Council, a single-member, simple-plurality system with no affirmative action is used. The numbers of women elected show striking differences. For the local authorities, the 1992 elections produced 32 per cent of women, rising to 41 per cent in 1998. At the national level, the main political party, the South-West African People's Organization, applies formal quotas, with the result that the proportion of women in parliament has grown from 8 per cent in 1989 to 29 per cent in 2003. However, in the regional elections only 3 per cent of those elected for the national council in 1992 were women, rising only to 4 per cent in 1998.⁷

In South Africa the closed-list PR system that proved so successful in sweeping women into national office in 1994, 1998 and 2004, was not applied wholesale to local council elections. Only 40 per cent of seats at the local level are selected through a PR system; a ward system with only one representative per ward and the winner decided by simple plurality is used for the rest. The African National Congress (ANC) did not apply the national quota of 30 per cent women in its candidate lists for the first local government elections in 1995; nor did other parties. As a result just 19 per cent of elected local councillors were women. In 2000 women did much better, thanks to a provision in the Municipal Structures Act urging parties to ensure that half of their candidate lists are made up of women, while women also competed more successfully for the ward seats, capturing 28 per cent of local government seats overall.⁸

Reservation systems

India's local government elections, which are ward-based, apply a different affirmative action method: the reservation of a percentage of wards for all-female competition. A 1992 constitutional amendment reserved one-third of local government seats for women, and in addition reserved seats for socially excluded caste groups in proportion to their numbers in the local population. This system, designed to overcome social resistance to the public participation of previously excluded groups in local affairs, has been celebrated for its success in putting about a million women in local government at any particular point in

time. However, there are some disadvantages. The location of the reserved territorial constituency rotates after each election, and this can discourage parties from investing in women's political capacities. Women may also be seen as short-term participants in politics: after one term of office the constituency is released for open competition and the incumbent woman representative usually stands little chance of re-election. But since a portion of constituents are obliged to vote for women and to be represented by a woman, the attitudes towards their participation should change over time.

An alternative reservation method has been used in Uganda, where the 1997 Local Government Act reserves 30 per cent of local council seats for all-female competition. But these are added seats, not a portion of existing seats. New wards are created for women to represent, cobbled together out of clusters of two to three existing wards, in effect at least doubling the constituency size which women represent, compared with regular ward representatives. Instead of giving women an advantage in political contest with men, new public space is created for women's exclusive occupation. The elections for the women's seats are held around two weeks after the ward elections. In the 1998 local elections, voter fatigue and irritation with this drawn-out procedure led to a failure to achieve quorums in the elections for women all over the country. After several attempts to re-run the ballots, the results from poor voter turn-outs were accepted.⁹ This undermined the legitimacy and credibility of Ugandan women as local councillors. The system also undermined their efforts to compete with men in ward elections. Voters told them that their turn would come later, in the special women's elections.¹⁰

RESISTANCE FROM TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES

One of the important factors inhibiting women's participation in local governance systems is the endurance of traditional institutions for running community affairs, and women's previous role—or lack of one—within them. Where local elites dominate existing systems, decentralization is likely to entrench

them, with not very promising prospects for women. Local elites are often drawn from groups who held power traditionally, for example tribal authorities, religious councils or groups of clan elders. These were often groups created or co-opted by colonial authorities to extend their power over community affairs to the extraction of revenue or labour for public works. Their traditional roles included the adjudication of family life and property, including extending or refusing approval of marriage unions, assigning responsibility for widows and orphans, and settling land disputes. These mechanisms of community self-government derive resilience from the local respect and legitimacy they enjoy.¹¹

These institutions, sometimes called “ascriptive” or “first-tier” institutions, are the source of substantive norms that remain deeply meaningful to participants, enabling them to survive when formal institutions suffer decay or discredit. Where civil conflict and social disruption prevail, they may remain the only source of functional authority. They also, importantly, control access to resources: to land, water and livelihoods; to arbitration mechanisms over disputes; and to informal services such as education and health. These are of key importance to the survival prospects of people whose government-run services and employment prospects are shrinking, and where services and amenities are commercialized. Traditional authority institutions in most parts of the world are deeply patriarchal, offering little space for the independent authority of women (and also excluding youth and the socially disadvantaged). They make women's participation contingent on conformity with the policy and spending preferences of masculine hierarchies.

The devolution of formal political and administrative powers to the local level may reinvigorate these systems and confer on them a new lease of life. The local chief or ruling group of landowning families typically assumes leadership positions or exercises patronage control over elected councillors. The continuity of power-holding may occur intentionally, when traditional rulers are politically powerful and demand protected space for their own authority, to exercise their traditional functions, for example in imposing order and enforcing security locally, and in the jurisdiction of petty local disputes.

Experiences in India

In Indian local government, where reservations in local government as already described are made for women and for representatives of scheduled castes and tribes, the old lines of authority may operate indirectly. A study of women elected to local councils in West Bengal found that 17 per cent of the women in reserved seats were married to men who had previously held the seat, in contrast to just 2 per cent of the women who held an open, unreserved seat.¹² Another study of women councillors in the first term of office after the reservation system had been installed in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, found that one-third of these women were stand-ins for husbands and sons.¹³ Thus some women in office act as proxies for influential male leaders in the locality who, had these wards not been reserved for women, would expect to have occupied these positions themselves.

Similar attempts are made to prevent certain members of scheduled castes and tribes from gaining seats on the council or being elected as *sarpanch* (council chairperson); where this position is reserved, traditional leadership groups often ensure that their own choice of candidate is elected. The prevalence of these “proxy politics” methods have delayed the erosion of traditional local power and patronage systems.¹⁴ Campaigns continue to be waged not on programmes and policies but on appeals to caste and community loyalty.¹⁵ Women councillors may be routinely denied access to records, knowledge of accounts, and even the right to sit with the male council members. In Rajasthan, where the traditional patriarchal system is deeply entrenched, there have been cases where women councillors and *sarpanches* (local council chairpeople) miss council meetings because they are not informed of them, and thereby can be removed from office for nonattendance at several consecutive meetings. No-confidence motions have unseated

Box 12.1 Ousting a Rajasthani women leader

Chaggibai was elected *sarpanch* of Rasulpura *panchayat* (council) in 1995, a position in this case reserved not just for a woman but for a member of a scheduled caste or tribe. Chaggibai was a member of the Bhil tribal group, and was encouraged to run for the position by members of the Rawat caste that made up over 60 per cent of the population in this Rajasthani constituency.

An independent-minded woman, Chaggibai was literate, had worked as a school administrator, and was known in the area as a participant in the national-level *Mahila Samakhya* (Women’s Equality) programme, and was therefore a surprising choice as a proxy candidate. But she had long ago separated from her husband and was seen therefore as more easy to manipulate than a married woman would be.

At the first village assembly after her election, the local Rawat strongman—who had always run the local council from the confines of his house—refused to allow Chaggibai to speak. She had assembled over 400 women and scheduled caste and tribal people to attend, but they were all ordered to go home. During the next months, Chaggibai mobilized the down-trodden groups in the community to support her efforts. She held open meetings to discuss local development plans, initiated construction projects concerning drains, school buildings and roads, and saw that the council office building was completed so as to accommodate open sessions.

When Chaggibai led local women in demonstrations against an illegal liquor store run by the deputy *sarpanch*, the Rawat community leaders counter-attacked, locking the council office doors against her, hiding files containing illicit transactions, and attempting to assault her. Subsequently, nine of the 12 council members including two women met privately and passed a vote of no confidence against her.

Chaggibai’s case was taken up by the People’s Union of Civil Liberties and by Rajasthan’s women’s movement, and a petition was filed against her removal in the Jaipur High Court. But she was never reinstated. She commented several years later: “They simply couldn’t tolerate a woman, especially a Bhil. If I had been their puppet, as they expected me to be, none of this would have happened.”

Sources: Weaver 2000; S.B. Civil Writ Petition 1998.

a number of lower-caste women *sarpanches* in Rajasthan, a case of which is described in box 12.1.

Not only may women councillors be silenced or undermined, but gender-equity proposals and policies emanating from the state or national level may be rejected. In 1995 the *sarpanches* of Bassi block, also in Rajasthan, unanimously passed a resolution condemning *saathins* (the word means “friend”), the women workers of the state’s Women’s Development Programme. The *saathins* were expected to engender a critical consciousness of gender relations amongst rural women, not simply to deliver development resources. Their work was therefore controversial in such a conservative society, and provoked the boycott by the *sarpanches* of Bassi. This in turn provoked the following observation: “As long as *sarpanches* of the Bassi type continue to dominate the panchayats, the women members will be bypassed, or even harassed, if they dare to oppose the male patriarchs of their villages”.¹⁶ Since the time of these incidents, there has been progress in the exercise of influence by women councillors and *sarpanches*; they have been able not only to articulate local women’s preferences regarding local services, but to change spending priorities in some areas.

Experiences in South Africa

In South Africa, some traditional bodies have been assigned direct powers, either in competition with, or directly over, democratically elected local councils. Under white rule, indirect rule in the black-designated apartheid territories was delegated to tribal authorities to help contain and depoliticize rural populations. When apartheid rule ended, these authorities fiercely resisted the loss of the considerable local power they had amassed.¹⁷ Both they and conservative Afrikaner associations have subsequently manoeuvred for as much local autonomy as possible. One of the democratization challenges in post-apartheid South Africa has been to undermine the racial and ethnic divisions that were previously exploited to help maintain political control.

The reorganization of local government in South Africa has proceeded in several difficult stages since the first round of

local government elections in 1995/6. First came the merger of racially segregated areas to end the skewed distribution of public goods and services. Middle-class white ratepayers in cities put up most resistance, but traditional leaders also objected when new municipal boundaries cut across rural districts and tribal land.

The need to juggle the demands of various interest groups led to extensive negotiation and uncertainty between 1994 and 2000 over the ways local government should be constituted. Traditional leaders were able to use this period to entrench their already considerable local influence.¹⁸ Represented by the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) and supported by such powerful ethnically based political parties as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in Kwa-Zulu Natal, in 2000 the traditional authorities demanded the reservation of 50 per cent of local authority positions, in response to the ANC government offer of 10 per cent. The compromise agreement was a 20 per cent reservation for hereditary leaders, which by definition excluded women.

Not only are unelected traditional authorities given space on local councils, but in some areas where state service delivery systems are weak, they have been designated the gatekeepers of access to key public goods. New government-sponsored “traditional development centres” are presided over by local chieftaincies and serve as one-stop shops dispensing pensions, HIV/AIDS awareness services, small business advice, as well as providing sites for mobile clinics. It may well be the case that in the more remote rural areas where the apparatus of administration is thin, traditional routes are the only effective means of delivering these services. One observer has commented: “It is ironic that government closest to the people is occurring within the context of a system dominated by non-elected, patriarchal structures. The flurry of compromises aimed at placating traditional leaders has ... in turn compromised rural women’s access and position, through the elevation of hereditary chieftainship to a privileged and protected position within local governance”.¹⁹

GENDER-SENSITIVE INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Wherever women's access to local government has been promoted through affirmative action measures, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have rushed to offer training programmes to build women leaders' capacity to engage in local decision making. These programmes make a valuable contribution to women councillors' assertiveness and ability to analyse policies; but they need to be complemented by a matching programme of institutional reorientation. A minimum programme for institutional reform in local government to enhance the capacities of women councillors might include:

- systems to ensure that the voice of women and other socially marginalized groups is weighted effectively against the interests of more powerful groups
- safeguards on poverty-sensitive or gender-sensitive spending
- effective means of enabling women councillors and women local residents to engage in participatory budgeting, planning and auditing, to see that funds that have been committed for gender-equity and pro-poor efforts are spent properly
- incentives to encourage bureaucrats and elected officials to respond to the concerns of disadvantaged groups and women.

Any such programme would presuppose that decentralization has devolved to local authorities a degree of financial autonomy, access to sufficient revenue to make an impact on local development, and planning powers. However, this might not be the case. Local governments have access to revenue from local sources (such as taxation, service charges and duties), and other sources (state or central government grants, and sometimes external aid); but there is tremendous variation across countries and within federal states in the levels of revenue that local governments enjoy. In many cases, their decision-making powers over local spending are severely constrained. Local governments also vary in their mandates to design spending plans for local services, amenities and social programmes.

There is also considerable variation in the degree of control that local authorities have over lower-level personnel in line ministries.

ENABLING WOMEN'S VOICES TO BE HEARD

The extent to which local governments acknowledge unequal participation by women and other marginalized groups and try to compensate for it varies very widely around the world. In the Indian system of local government, the *gram sabha*, or village assembly, is the arena for participation in planning. Indian states differ in their regulations for membership and quorums in these assemblies, but some have tried to remedy deficits in women's participation. In Madhya Pradesh, a quorum at a *gram sabha* meeting is not reached until one-third of the people assembled are women. In Rajasthan, a similar provision requires that women must be present in the village assembly in the same proportions that they are found in the local community—that is, at least 50 per cent.

Women may be present in councils and village assemblies yet may not feel free to voice their views. The Indian state of Kerala has instituted additional measures to elicit women's views on local planning. About 10 per cent of the local budget is ring-fenced for "Women's development", and decisions about the allocation of these funds must be taken by all-women subgroups in the special *gram sabha* annual planning meeting. A further measure is designed to make local planning for a less intimidating and more accessible to women. Legal recognition has been given to smaller assemblies, both at ward level and among even smaller neighbourhood units of around 50 households. These are somewhat better suited to women's participation than the much larger *gram sabhas*; they are less intimidating and address locality-specific problems, enabling women to take active decision-making roles.

Reviews of local spending

In decentralization processes everywhere, the function or power most weakly institutionalized is that of monitoring and auditing

local spending. In India, each state's Local Government Act has made some provision for the "watchdog" role of the village assembly in supervising and monitoring the village *panchayat*. In most states village assemblies are empowered, on paper, to examine annual statements of accounts and audit reports. But this audit function is vague: there is no assertion of the power of village assemblies to audit actual spending through certification of expenditure or to ensure propriety in financial dealings. Thus there are few known cases of the gram sabha seriously challenging spending decisions.

A more structured approach to participatory reviews of spending has evolved in Brazilian municipalities. This was pioneered in 1988 when the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) introduced participatory municipal budgeting in Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte. Participatory municipal budgeting gives citizens' neighbourhood associations a direct say in how local funds are spent. Their roles in monitoring the execution of public works, and in reviewing expenditures, are both institutionalized. The annual budgeting exercise involves citizen representation on sectoral committees in their neighbourhoods to establish spending priorities for amenities such as paved roads, drainage, sewerage and school construction. Two huge open assemblies are held annually, one to review spending on the previous year's budget, the second to elect representatives from each city zone to the Participatory Budget Council. Members of this Council, which includes senior municipal officials, are responsible for compiling the municipal budget.

During the 1990s participatory budgeting produced much greater equity in the distribution of public funds.²⁰ Between 1989 and 1996 the proportion of households in Porto Alegre with access to piped water rose from 80 to 98 per cent; those served by the municipal sewerage system rose from 46 to 85 per cent, and the number of children enrolled in public schools doubled.²¹ Levels of popular participation have grown over time, with previously powerless and marginal groups making up at least half if not more of the regional assemblies. However, women are still not represented at the top decision-making levels of the neighbourhood committees that they otherwise dominate.²²

Gender budgeting at local level

Gender-sensitive local budget analysis is a new tool with which feminist groups have recently been building the capacities of local councillors. Its use at local level is still in its infancy, not least because many local governments rely upon transfers from the centre to finance essential services, and therefore make few spending decisions of their own. In Uganda and South Africa gendered local budget analysis is pursued through feminist NGOs: the Forum for Women in Democracy in Uganda and the Women's Budget Initiative in South Africa.²³ Some progress has been made in South Africa towards raising awareness of the impact of local government spending on programmes relating to women. This has involved informing women about local government revenues and expenditures, and highlighting the types of resource allocation that promote gender equality.²⁴

Gender-sensitive local budget analysis has exposed a key constraint on building accountability to women in rural areas: the perception that women contribute little to local revenues and therefore deserve little say in their expenditure. In Uganda, a form of poll tax, a vestige of the colonial "hut tax", is collected from men, although the payments may actually be taken from the income earned by women in the household. Other methods for raising local revenue, for instance in service cost recovery, have gender-specific impacts. User fees for health, education or water supply connections affect women if they are the family members chiefly responsible for generating funds to pay for basic services.²⁵ Low-income women are particularly affected by the imposition of licences and taxes for informal entrepreneurial activity, such as street trade or market stalls. Although in urban areas African women see themselves as taxpayers and as entitled to know how their taxes are used, in rural areas women may not be seen as taxpayers in their own right. Efforts by women to ensure that revenue is collected and spent in certain ways may not be accepted as an appropriate focus for women's participation.²⁶

Innovations in local governance should amplify women's voice in local deliberations, support spending on women's needs, and build the capacity of women councillors to uncover fraud or failure to match commitments with spending. However, insufficient attention has been paid to entrenched attitudes among

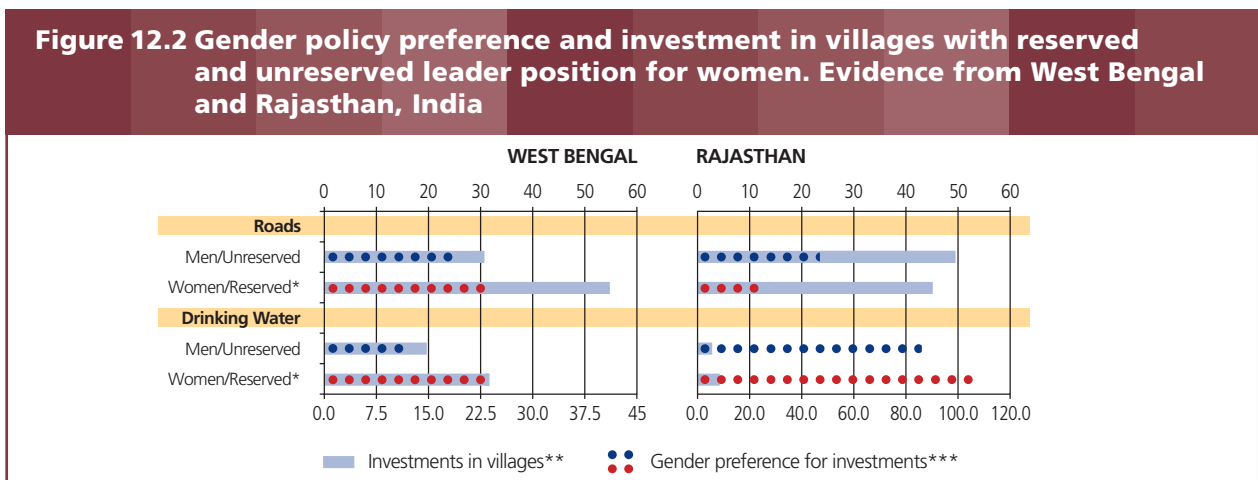
local government bureaucrats. Village accountants, land registration officials, officials in charge of local common property resources such as forests and water, tend to resist the transfer of authority from their line ministries to elected local councillors; these may seem to them to be socially inferior, technically ill-equipped for decision making, and to be assuming responsibilities rightfully their own. In some contexts these officials reserve special contempt for women councillors, whose authority they may undermine by refusing to co-operate with them.

WOMEN’S IMPACT ON LOCAL DECISION MAKING

In spite of the significant obstacles to women’s local political effectiveness, there is evidence from decentralization experiments around the world that women councillors and residents do manage to articulate priorities in local planning and decision making that differ from those of men. In Rajasthan, women councillors and leaders have been increasingly vocal in articulating women’s perspectives in matters such as access to water, fuel and health care.²⁷ They are also active over such practices such as the illegal privatization of the commons by encroachment and tree-felling; these are often important sources of illicit

“rents” for *panchayat* officials. Evidence from a few all-women *panchayats* in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal shows that women have introduced shifts in local spending, prioritizing land transfers to women, water supply issues, and toilets for women in low-caste areas.²⁸

Two systematic studies of the relationship between women’s stated priorities and actual spending patterns in village councils led by women in West Bengal and Rajasthan suggest that, despite the handicaps they may face in terms of education and prior experience, and the preconception that they will provide weak leadership, women have a real impact on policy decisions.²⁹ These studies found an unambiguous association between women’s stated spending priorities—drinking water and roads—and changed levels of spending, as shown in figure 12.2. In both states, women expressed more interest in drinking water facilities than men, and spending shifted—even if only a little in the Rajasthan case—to reflect their priorities. Another review, this time of the quality of services under the supervision of *panchayats* led by women, found that drinking water supply services were generally better, and that women councillors were less likely to demand bribes from contractors. Unfortunately, the review also found that residents in these *panchayats* were less likely to be satisfied with the service.³⁰ Even when objective measurements demonstrated the superiority of councils run by women in delivering certain services, they were held to harsh standards of performance.



Notes: * Villages (*gram panchayats*) with leader position (*Pradhan*) reserved for women. ** For the year 2002. The indicators for investment used were: for roads, condition of roads (100 if good); for drinking water, number of drinking water facilities built or repaired (bottom axis). *** Percentage of issues raised in the previous six months (among the total number of issues raised by women or by men); information collected in 2000 (top axis).

Source: Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004.

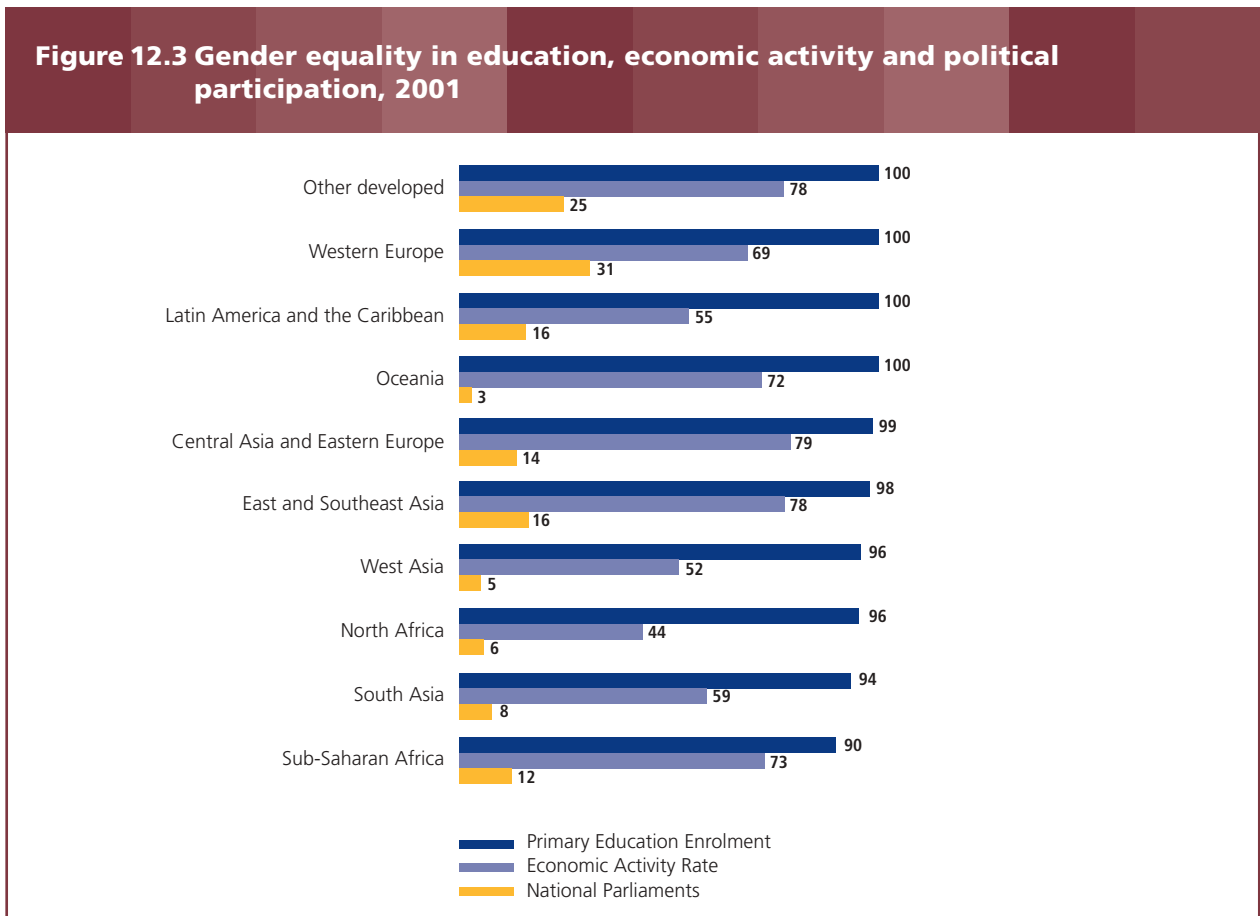


POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: THE PROMISE FOR WOMEN

Local government will be the political arena of women’s participation to watch over the next decade. In spite of the formidable obstacles women face in gaining a presence in local government bodies and gaining a hearing for their major concerns, there is no question that in some contexts they are having an impact, and that this impact is being reflected increasingly in local spending patterns. Conflicts over local resource access may well intensify in coming years, but the numbers of women councillors defending women’s interests will increase also.

There is ample evidence to show, as the studies drawn upon have done, that women-responsive politics and policy making require changes to the conduct of politics and systems of governance that reach beyond simply putting more women in office. Strong and autonomous women’s movements are needed to debate priorities, to legitimize feminist policy demands, and press them upon political parties and government leaders at both national and transnational levels. Public institutions such as social service bureaucracies, public expenditure, audit and judicial systems have still a long way to go in developing sensitivity to women’s needs and to gender equity. Women legislators alone cannot compensate for gender-specific accountability failures in governance systems.

There is still much research to be done on the policy impact of women in public office in developing countries. Although



Notes: All indicators are measured as female to male ratios, including “National Parliaments”, where the ratio calculated was the number of female to male members. Hence, a ratio of 100 means perfect equality among genders.
Sources: Calculated from UN Statistical Division 2004; UNDP 2003.

male bias in governance institutions can act as a counterweight to the efforts of women in office, the main drivers of gender-equity policy agendas around the world have been women's political engagement and civil society activism. This is reason enough to pursue gender parity in politics with more vigour. A lot remains to be done. Whereas gender disparities in primary education and economic activity have been substantially reduced, gender disparities in formal politics remain striking, as figure 12.3 shows.

Figure 12.3 is a sobering reminder that the successful integration of larger numbers of women in politics remains exceptional; these are inspirational cases that do not yet indicate a trend. Finding ways of increasing women's participation in public life—as elected representatives, as executive appointees, and in the rank-and-file of public service bureaucracies, from the police to the education system—remains a priority. And even then, it will not on its own necessarily result in women-friendly public policies. The accountability of public and private power holders to women must be improved, and institutional frameworks reshaped to be more responsive to the needs of women and to the expression of demands by women activists inside and outside the formal machinery of government and political life.

Notes

- 1 Molyneux 2004:16.
- 2 Beall 2004:4.
- 3 UCLG 2003.
- 4 Massolo 2004:25.
- 5 Hubbard 2001:11; Bauer 2004.
- 6 Beall 2004:15.
- 7 Bauer 2004.
- 8 Beall 2004:17.
- 9 Ahikire 2003.
- 10 Tamale 1999.
- 11 AnanthPur 2004.
- 12 Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004:984.
- 13 Buch 2000.
- 14 Vijayalakshmi 2002:18.
- 15 Vijayalakshmi and Chandrashekar 2001.
- 16 *EPW* 1995:5335.
- 17 Beall 2004.
- 18 Mbatha 2003.
- 19 Beall 2004:19–20.
- 20 Avritzer 2000:19.
- 21 World Bank 2001b.
- 22 Abers 1998:530; Avritzer 2000:14–15.
- 23 Beall 2004:31.
- 24 Budlender 1999; Coopoo 2000; Beall 2004:31.
- 25 Budlender 1999:21.
- 26 Beall 2004:31.
- 27 Mayaram 2000.
- 28 Kaushik 1996: 93–6.
- 29 Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004: 984.
- 30 Topalova 2003.