



# Women Gaining Voice

## Political Representation and Participation in Decentralized Systems

Over the last two decades, decentralization has been changing government around the globe. Reforms have granted subnational 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 — intended to make local government more accessible, accountable, and responsive.



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Decentralization has sometimes been presented as a magic bullet for both development and democracy. Since nearly everyone, from world leaders to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to donors, agrees that development and democracy both fail unless women are included on an equal footing with men, successful decentralization should make government more accessible, accountable, and responsive to women.

But does it? Since 2004, 13 research teams in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, supported by the Women's Rights and Citizenship program of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), have been exploring this question.

### Fostering women's participation

Using such methods as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and women's political life histories (in which researchers collect oral autobiographies focusing on women's experiences in politics), the researchers learned whether and how decentralization had improved women's influence over public decision-making. They also used the research to support women's efforts to participate more effectively. In the town of Cotacachi, Ecuador, for instance, the project team helped document women's public spending priorities for inclusion in the municipal plan.

The research carried out by UNNATI, an NGO in Rajasthan, India, fed directly into its work on governance and training. As part of the project, which 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.

### Diverse locales, common experiences

The projects were as diverse as the researchers and the places where they were carried out. University-based researchers in Benin, NGO staff in Nepal, and a former municipal councillor in El Salvador were among those selected through the three regional competitions. The diversity of decentralization reforms and contexts makes having detailed studies on local experiences especially important: generalizations can be misleading. Some experiences turned out to be widely shared, however.

Some decentralization experts and women's rights activists argue, for example, that it is easier for women to become involved in local government than in



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national government 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 ensure their needs and opinions are taken into account. In fact, it can be harder. In South Africa, for instance, conservative local politics made it difficult for women to get elected. 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.

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### Quotas for women: Only the first step

Many of the 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 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 included a mandatory 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 the city of Rawalpindi: “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 IDRC-supported 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 is rare.

### Challenging gender stereotypes

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, hijacked, and handled by men.”



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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 women 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.”

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.

### Reinforcing women's traditional roles

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. 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 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.” The leadership of the male-dominated



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political parties shows little interest in increasing the number of women in local government or expanding the scope of their participation.

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.

### Mobilizing for women's rights

Many of the projects highlighted the importance of mobilizing civil society to support women's rights 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.

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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.

## New venues, new opportunities

Despite formidable challenges, many women are being elected to local government and 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.

A district council member in the town of Badin, in southeastern 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 through this system, 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 either and being among men to



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... 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."

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The Women's Rights and Citizenship program supports applied research in the field of women's rights, citizenship, and development. It thus contributes to bringing Southern voices into current debates in the international gender and development field.

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