

Decentralization and Women Empowerment: Exploring the Linkages

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Abstract

Empowerment is the most recent policy approach to women in development. It takes into account not only both the practical and strategic gender needs of women but also recognizes their triple role in development. In doing so it follows a bottom-up approach. Empowerment has a number of dimensions with political participation as being one of them. The political presence of women in politics, however, has a disappointing track record. This is because a number of existing structural, institutional and cultural factors offers constrain to their participation in politics. Women's political presence and empowerment have some obvious links e.g. by having political presence in decision-making structures, women can influence the formulation of policies affecting other women in society. Decentralization provides greater opportunities for the citizen to participation in governance at the local level and hence could be a good policy option for enhancing women's political participation. It does so by increasing descriptive representation of women, which in turn leads to women's responsive policies.

Key words: Decentralization, gender, governance, participation and empowerment

Introduction

Even though, the last half of the 20th century has witnessed some improvements in gender equality, gender disparities still persist in most of developing countries. In almost all developing countries, women do not possess the same legal, social and economic rights as do men. Similarly, gender gaps are widespread in access to and control over resources, in economic opportunities, in power and political voice (World Bank, 2001). Despite considerable efforts, many countries in the world have not been able to eliminate the gender gaps. Nordic countries, with Sweden standing out as the most advanced in the world, have comparatively been successful in narrowing these gaps

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(World Economic Forum, 2005). The existing gender disparities give rise to a number of questions e.g. what are the reasons for the existing gender disparities? What can be done to eliminate such disparities? And their relative impacts on development? The reasons are many folds. It is often being argued that developing planning has done little in enhancing the well being of women in the Third World. Rather, it has left them in an even more vulnerable social and economic position. Despite the fact that women constitute approximately more than half of the world's population and provide one-tenth of the world's formal income, receives only one five-hundredth of the world's development funding. Similarly, the various policy approaches to women in development did not fully recognize the triple role of women in development and have not been able to meet their practical as well as strategic needs (Hitchcock & Zenzele, 1986).

Development is a phenomenon that is taking place in all walks of life. It aims at improving the quality of life (e.g. increasing access to education, health, sanitation and other basic needs) of all people regardless of their sex, color or caste. For the process of development to be more efficient and effective, both women and men should equally participate in the decisions and processes that shape their lives. However, women being considered as a marginalized group in societies around the world, contribute very little to the process of development. One of the policy approaches that can help women contribute equally and more efficiently to development is the empowerment approach. This approach is seen as a viable policy approach for women in development. It arose out of the failure of the equity approach and has its origins in the emergent feminist writings and grass roots organization experiences of many Third World Women. It can help women meet their strategic as well as practical gender needs. It also recognizes the triple role of women in development (Moser 1989).

Before defining and explaining the term 'empowerment', it is worth mentioning here that the different approaches to women's empowerment used in development activities include economic participation, political participation, educational attainment, health and well-being etc. The major focus of this paper is to assess the empowerment of women from a perspective of their presence in politics. A number of factors hinder women's participation in politics. Based on some theoretical reasons, it can be said that decentralization may impact women's status. First, an attempt is made to find out whether women's political presence and empowerment have some links in common. Later it focuses on how decentralization enhances political participation of women and how women's enhanced presence

in politics leads to women's' responsive policies. The main objective is to develop a theoretical framework showing that empowerment can be achieved through political participation, which in turn can be achieved by decentralization and that decentralization can be a good alternative policy approach for achieving empowerment.

What is 'empowerment'?

The word 'empowerment' is used in many different contexts and by different organizations. Its meaning and understanding largely depends on the context in which it is being used. The Human Development Report relates empowerment to participation. It says that since development is for the people, they must participate fully in the decisions and processes that affect their lives (UNDP, 1995). To Oxfam empowerment means being able to challenge the existing oppression and inequality in society (Oxfam, 12995). Rowlands sees empowerment as a bottom-up process that cannot be formulated from top-down. To Rowlands, empowerment does not only mean to have access to decision-making but also being able and entitled to occupy the decision-making space (Rowland, 1995). Batliwala defining it from a feminist perspective state that women empowerment should results in (a) an understanding that both men and women are equal beings regardless of their gender. Using their full potentials can help construct a more humane society for all. And that (b) men should give up the false value systems and ideologies of oppression in dealing with women (Batliwala, 1994).

Constraints to women's' participation in politics

Ohene-Konadu points out that the current state of women's participation in politics and public decision-making is disappointing. He calls it a global phenomenon. Even from history, it is evident that men have always monopolized and dominated strategic decision-making positions. Despite considerable efforts, women still remain marginalized and under represented in those areas of public life where important decisions and policies are made. Constituting almost half of the world's population and making half of the electorate, women do have an important role to play in politics (Konadu, 2001).

There are a number of factors that constrain participation of women in politics. These can be categorized as structural, cultural and institutional factors. Structural factors comprise the 'supply side' variables'. It would include e.g. women's literacy rates, their educational levels and average incomes. Women's participation in elections will largely depend on the extent of availability of these basic

resources. Structural factors as constrain to women's participation in politics are more prominent especially in developing countries where (a) limited resources are made available for e.g. for education and (b) preference is given to the education of young sons instead of daughters. Structural factors can hinder women's participation in politics as Ohene-Kunadu points out in his survey of Ghanaian women that one of the major reasons of women's low participation in local politics was the lack of personal resources (Konadu, 2001).

A general perception in societies around the world is that women's major role is to cook food, take care of the children and the household. Different societies have different social norms and values. In some societies both men and women are assigned specific roles and duties. In most of developing countries, only the reproductive role of women is recognized. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for women to participate in the public sphere of life. Cultural factors therefore offer constraint to women participation in politics. Institutional factors may also impact women's political participation. Electoral system with more seats per district and proportional formula for allocating seats can enhance women's participation (Darcy et al., 1994). Quota system is another important institutional device that can guarantee a minimum number of women seats-holders in legislature.

Women's political presence and empowerment: Is there any link?

Strengthening women's participation in all walks of life has gained enormous popularity in economic and social development discourses in the last decades. International and bilateral development agencies have designed women specific policies to integrate them better into economic and social processes. Measures to enhance women's participation in politics despite being supported through affirmative actions are still contested. Despite the fact that women constitute almost half of the world's population, have lower presence in the elected political bodies. The proportion of women as MPs in 176 parliaments in 1995 was only 11.6 percent (IDEA, 2002). During 2003, there has been a slight increase in representation of women, which stands at 15 percent globally. However, there is still a long way to go as this increase is comparatively at a lower rate. In order to increase women's representation at a relatively faster rate, various methods such as the electoral quotas have either been proposed or implemented to address the present gender imbalance in decision-making (IDEA, 2002). Pintat urges that allocating quota for women can prove to be a good strategy to overcome the factors that hinder women's participation in political process. He states that the number of female representatives in a number of countries has increased due to

the reservation of seats either through self-imposed party regulations or through legal action by the state (Pintat, 2001).

Proponents of the quota system believe that it can lead to women's empowerment. However, they do not explain as to how the one leads to the other. Even though, Phillips considers political presence as a 'top-down' approach and sees the many arguments against gender quota, she still recognizes the importance of quota in politics. It can serve as a symbolic recognition for the disadvantaged groups. She poses an interesting question in arguing against the opponents of gender quota i.e. if there can be an agreement on the demand for an equal representation of women, why not the same on their equal representation in politics? (Phillips, 1995). Similarly, Hust is very optimistic about the quota system in rural India. He says that '*while one can not claim that women are really 'empowered' now, one can also not deny the fact that a certain gain of power has taken place as a direct consequence of the quota*' especially taking into consideration that other women's empowerment strategies employed by the Indian state during the last five decades have paid less dividends. However, he urges the quota alone cannot secure women's empowerment. A number of additional strategies e.g. building women's capacities, removing structural barriers etc. are needed to be employed. To Hust women may not necessarily represent women's interests especially in the absence of strong women's movements (Hust, 2002).

Political representation may not necessarily lead to empowerment. Blair in his study on decentralization in the state of Karnataka in India finds that democratic local government does increase participation and representation but does not necessarily enhance empowerment of non-elite groups nor does this form of government make the distribution of benefits more equitable. Some of the policy makers consider that approaches used to gain empowerment are 'bottom-up' in nature (Blair, 2000). As Batliwala (1993), Chandra (1997) and Rowlands (1998), have rightly pointed out that empowerment approaches are 'bottom-up' in nature. They urge that the disadvantaged groups should first gain awareness of the reasons of their disempowerment. Once the reasons have been identified, various measures (economic and social) can be introduced to empower them in various areas. Another argument stated to support this notion is that women may not necessarily protect the interests of other women. Hust points out that there are no guarantees that women representative will work for the benefit of other women because in many cases women get into politics because of personal connections or support from elites. As a consequence they may be unable or unwilling to support grassroots women's interests (Hust, 2002).

Decentralization and its forms

What is decentralization?

There is no common definition or understanding of decentralization. It can have different meanings to different people depending on the context in which the term “decentralization” is being used. It may be defined in a number of ways. However, definitions differ from each other depending on the type and form of decentralization (Work, 2002). Rondineli defines decentralization as *“the transfer of responsibility for planning, management and resource raising and allocation from the central government and its agencies to: (a) the field units of central government ministries or agencies, (b) subordinate units or levels of government, (c) semiautonomous public authorities or corporations, (d) area wide, regional or functional authorities, or (e) nongovernmental private or voluntary organizations”* (Rondineli, 1981a). According to Mawhood, *“decentralization is any act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institutions at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy”* (Mawhood, 1983).

Forms of decentralization

Rondineli categorizes decentralization into four major types i.e. deconcentration, delegation, devolution and privatization (Rondineli, 1981a). According to Manor, decentralization has three major types i.e. deconcentration or administrative decentralization, fiscal decentralization and devolution or democratic decentralization. All these types can occur simultaneously or they may occur in isolation. Sometimes various combinations of these types are being used. All the different types of decentralization share one common characteristic i.e. decentralization is not a situation rather it is a development and a process of change from one institutional system to another (Manor, 1999). Following are some of the forms of decentralization.

Deconcentration or administrative decentralization

According to Rondineli, *deconcentration or administrative decentralization* involves the transfer of specific administrative responsibilities to lower levels within the central government ministries and agencies (Rondineli, 1981a). Manor describes it as the dispersal of agents of higher levels of government into lower-level arenas and emphasizes that deconcentration and democratization should occur simultaneously. When deconcentration occurs in isolation, agents of the higher levels of government will remain accountable only to the authorities at the higher level. As a result there will be no change in the

influence of organized interests at the lower level. Without democratization, deconcentration further strengthens the central power. Deconcentration is in practice mostly in less developed countries (Manor, 1999). According to Mawhood, the various factors responsible for excluding people from the affairs of the government in less developed countries include higher levels of illiteracy, livelihood patterns and poor communication systems. Under such circumstances the deconcentrated field offices enjoy the power to take all kinds of decisions. They are not subject to local pressures. Despite entering into voluntary consultations with the local notables, central government's demands are always prioritised (Mawhood, 1983).

Fiscal decentralization

The transfer of fiscal resources and revenue generating resources to the lower levels in the system is called fiscal decentralization. It empowers the lower levels to have influence over budgets and financial decisions. It must also be followed simultaneously by democratization or otherwise it may not increase the influence of organized interests at the lower levels (Manor, 1997). The transfer of fiscal powers to the lower levels is essential for other forms of decentralization. For instance, if the lower levels in a system receive only decision-making powers but do not receive any powers to have control over budgets and financial resources at the same time, all the decisions regarding different activities (e.g. development works etc) would be in vein. At the same time, a mere transfer of funds without decentralizing the decision power may also give rise to a number of problems. For example, it might be possible that the authority over the use of funds might remain ambiguous, which might lead to the risk of misusing the funds (Swiss Development Corp., 2001).

Devolution or democratic decentralization

Devolution or democratic decentralization is the transfer of powers and resources from the centre to authorities at the lower levels, which are representatives of as well as accountable to the local populations (Manor 1999). The authorities at the lower levels are largely or wholly independent of the central government and are democratic in some way and to some degree (Manor 1999). The local units of government are autonomous and independent bodies, have a legal status and are separate or distinct from the central government. Central government has only indirect, supervisory control over such units. These units normally exist in the form of local governments (Rondelini, 1981a). Democratic decentralization can take different forms. Candidates are elected by secret ballots. Election can be both direct and indirect. In

case of direct elections, candidates are elected by the people. In case of indirect elections, the directly elected representatives elect members at the higher levels. The persons being elected either directly or indirectly become members or heads of their respective councils as the case may be (Manor, 1997).

Delegation

Delegation is the transfer of public functions to the lower levels of government, public corporations or any other authorities outside of the regular political-administrative structure to implement programs on behalf of a government agency. Even though the agents possess broad discretion to carry out the specified devolved functions and duties, it is the central government that remains as the sovereign authority (Rondelini, 1981a).

Privatisation

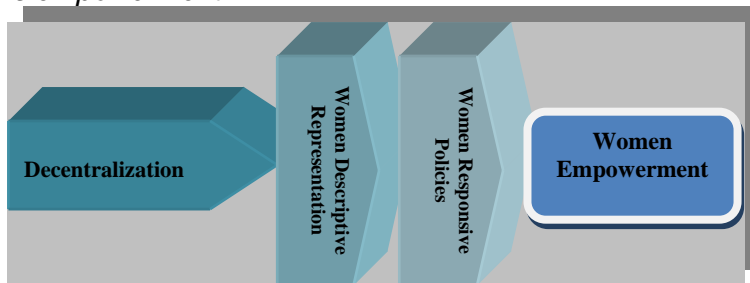
Privatisation occurs when responsibility for public functions are being transferred either to voluntary organizations or private enterprises (Agrawal & Ostrom, 1999).

Decentralization and women's empowerment

As has been mentioned earlier that approaches to women's empowerment or say dimensions are several with political participation as being one of them. Political participation can help women empower in a number of ways. For example, it can help them to achieve an equitable representation in decision-making structures, both formal and informal. In doing so, they can influence the formulation of policies affecting their societies. Absence of women from the structures of governance would mean that policies designed at the national, regional and local levels for the allocation of resources etc. would lack input from women. Such policies can only benefit men, thus making women more marginalized. Women empowerment thus depends to a great extent on the level of their participation in politics. Hence it is agreed upon to some extent that political presence and empowerment have important links, the question now is what can help increase political participation? Democratic decentralization can be a good policy approach in this regard because it is about good governance, about providing greater opportunities for citizen's participation in governance at the local level. It can be useful in empowering women in a number of ways e.g. it can increase the descriptive representation of women in local governments and at the same time it can help in the formulation women's responsive policies.

Figure 1, is an illustration of how decentralization may lead to women empowerment. It is obvious from the figure that decentralization may enhance women descriptive representation in politics. The enhanced descriptive representation may have profound impacts on the policies designed at the local as well as regional levels. Thus, it is most probable that the policies designed may be more responsive to women's needs. Consequently, both the women's descriptive representation as well as the women's responsive policies may ultimately lead to their empowerment.

Figure-1 showing the possible link between decentralization and women's empowerment



Source: Self designed

Decentralization and women's descriptive representation

Women's role in majority of the countries is confined mostly to performing household duties such as childrearing, cleaning and cooking etc. It makes it difficult for them to participate in the politics at the national level. The local arena of governance is best suited to women's participation. Norris and Lovenduski states that decentralization pushes government to a regional level of government. Regional governments are more accessible to women due to three reasons. First, local government is geographically closer to home, which makes it easy for them to carry out the burden of family responsibilities. Secondly, the less stringent criteria of eligibility at the local level make it easy for the women to be part of the local government (Norris & Joni, 1995). Third, local government more likely addresses issues of direct concern to women (Renihart, 2001). Evertzen states more or less the same arguments to support the notion that local government can serve as the most appropriate level for women to participate (Evertzen, 2001).

It is evident from a number of countries' experiences engaged in the decentralization process that the process has helped the marginalized groups (especially the women) in societies to participate in the local

government. This inclusion of women in significant numbers in local government is largely due to the affirmative action taken by such countries. Goetz points out that in some countries there are more women in local than in national politics. It is because these countries after engaging into the decentralization process have introduced quotas or other affirmative actions at the local level (Goetz, 2004). Akiiki in his study on women's participation in local government in Ghana, found that due to the institutional and legal framework there has been an increase in women's participation in local government. One-third of the seats have been reserved for women in the councils.

However, affirmative actions alone could not help increase women's participation. Efforts are needed to change gender norms at the local level (Akiki, 2002). Siahann in her study on decentralization in Indonesia finds that decentralization harms women in regions with strong patriarchal set ups. The measures she suggest for decentralization to more effective in such regions include the undertaking of comprehensive programs for gender education, public awareness of the domestic violence as a crime, change in religious leader's attitudes and collection of gender sensitive data (Siahaan, 2002). Ohene emphasized the need to remove the structural constrains that have hindered women's participation in local government in Ghana. He says that despite 30% quota in district assemblies, women constitute only 7% of the assembly members countrywide. He considers that factors such as lack of availability of funds, low literacy among women, little training opportunities for women candidates etc. are responsible for their low participation (Konadu, 2001).

Descriptive representation and women's responsive policies

Decentralization as mentioned above is a tool to enhance women's descriptive representation both in local and national politics. Once they get a more or less equitable representation in the decision-making structures, they can best take part in the decision-making processes and hence can best influence the formulation of policies affecting them. Because the terms 'descriptive representation' and 'substantial representation' will be frequently used in the discussion to follow, it is, therefore, important to explain the two so that readers can get a better understanding of what they mean. Descriptive representation of women means election or appointment of women to positions of political authority. Substantive representation means the pursuance of policies by the elected or appointed women that can benefit other women.

Women's descriptive representation is important in a number of ways. First, it indicates the political inequalities between women and men. A comparison of both women's presence in population (which is slightly over 50%) and their political representation stands at about 15 percent indicates that women are not equal in power to men. A more descriptive representation would produce trust among historically marginalized groups and legitimacy of the government. Descriptive representation can have profound impacts on substantive representation. That is, in case women are underrepresented in the government, it will adversely affect their decision-making power. Ultimately, they will not be able to safeguard the interests of women. Descriptive representation is, therefore, crucial for having substantive representation as well. Gilligan states that despite being different from each other on the basis of race, class, sexual orientation and religion etc. all women at least have one thing in common i.e. being women. Their common experiences as women may mean they have a different voice and hence cannot always be adequately represented by men (Gilligan, 1982).

The effects of descriptive representation on legislative outcomes are often significant. For example, Carroll both men and women legislators in the U.S. states believe that women prioritize legislation on families, children, health care and women's rights (Carroll, 1995). According to Bratton and Ray majority of women in legislature in Norway is more concerned about generous childcare allowances. Similarly, women's descriptive representation can also inspire other women in society to try to run for office or to pursue other high status career. Elected women can thus play a symbolic role both for women and men (Bratton et al., 2002). However, some (for instance, Hust) believe that there are no guarantees that women representative will work for the benefit of other women because in many cases women get into politics because of personal connections or support from elites. As a consequence they may be unable or unwilling to support grassroots women's interests (Hust, 2002).

Conclusion

Owing to the existing gender disparities and gender gaps, it is imperative to state that the 'empowerment approach' to women in development could prove crucial in narrowing the gender gaps. Women in most developing countries do participate in social and economic activities. For example, they are being engaged in agricultural activities, serving in different government departments as well as working in 'non-governmental organizations'. Their presence in the political sphere of life, however, is minimal. Politics itself is about

power. The power to take decisions, power to influence decisions, power over who should get what, how and when, and the power over values, ideas and recourses etc. This leads us to the notion that political presence to a great extent can help empower women. The two assumptions (political presence of women in decision-making structures and its impacts on the formulation of policies) to support the above argument are being tested using democratic decentralization as a policy approach. Decentralization is about good governance. It increases participation of citizens in governance at the grass root levels. In many countries, decentralization has resulted in government's affirmative actions to ensure inclusion of women in the political sphere of life. Even though the initial outcomes, as against the presumed theoretical arguments are to a certain extent disappointing. However, decentralization alone cannot be blamed for that. As Goetz rightly points out that in addition to take affirmative actions, there is a need to overcome the rigid social and cultural barriers, which hinders women's participation in the public sphere (Goetz,). Similarly, in many cases the decision to decentralize is based on motives such as internal political considerations and regime needs to create or to renew legitimacy. For example, in Pakistan the decentralization reforms in the form of Devolution Plan (2000) indeed have resulted in increased women's participation. However, the elected representatives especially the women councilors rarely admitted that power and authority has been transferred to the local level (Khan, 2006). To sum up, it is worth mentioning that decentralization could be a useful policy approach for ensuring enhanced women's political presence provided that additional measures are taken for curbing the structural and cultural barriers to women's participation in the political process. Descriptive representation can have profound impacts on the substantive representation of women. That is the high the number of women in the decision-making structures, the greater will be the chances to protect the interests of women and to influence the formulation of policies concerning them.

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