

Gender and Decentralisation: An Introduction

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Without equal political, social and economic participation of women, it will not be possible to overcome poverty, underdevelopment and inequality in access to income, education, health and food. Governance has therefore to be more participative. Decentralisation of governance might be a chance to achieve a more participatory and inclusive mode of governance, because it may contribute to deepening democratisation.

Decentralisation is a form of governance that transfers political decision-making to the regional and local level. People expect decentralisation to foster more and broader political participation of citizens in local and regional development processes as well as providing better answers to their needs. In developing countries, decentralisation is also justified by the argument that on the grounds of allocative efficiency, enhanced responsiveness and effectiveness, it helps poverty reduction. In theory, citizens have more control over decisions taken at local level and actions will reflect their needs and preferences better. Over the last few years, the debate on local governance has focused on how to:

- deepen democratic self-government and strengthen participatory forms of development;
- reform the state, modes of governance and methods of government so as to give citizens greater voice and influence in decision-making;
- enhance the accountability of government and the responsiveness of public policies to the needs of the population, and especially the poor;
- increase the effectiveness of public policies and service delivery (the principle of 'subsidiarity');
- enhance social capital by fostering social cohesion and trust within local communities;
- provide dispute-resolution mechanisms to manage conflict peacefully at local level.

In addition to these points, decentralisation may contribute to gender equality because it approaches women better: Women frequently belong to the marginalised groups of society. Actually, they are not only excluded from citizenship and rights, but their interests and concerns in public decisions and public services are not reflected in political decision-making. The lack of democracy in gender relations excludes them from participating in governance. This also hinders poverty reduction. Since participation and access to decision-making is easier for women at local level, a gender-sensitive implementation of decentralisation processes could foster democratic governance structures. This applies to women both in urban and rural areas. Given that communication structures make organising in urban areas easier for women, it is necessary to focus on the challenges of decentralisation for rural women.

As already underlined in the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, women in rural areas are more discriminated and marginalised than other women. In Sub-Saharan Africa, seven out of ten women work in the agricultural sector, mainly in subsistence-level agriculture. They lack economic security and endure very hard working and living conditions. They are the main producers of staple crops such as rice, maize, sweet potatoes, etc. and account for 60 to 80 percent of people's food intake. This corresponds to 90 percent of rural food intake. Despite this fact, women face enormous challenges:

- Women do not have equal participation in decision-making;
- Women do not have equal access to tangible assets including equipment and land;
- Women do not have equal access to credit and markets;
- Women do not have equal access to training;
- Women have more working hours than men not only because of the double burden but especially also due to the type of work they do.

Considering this situation, decentralisation could be a concept for an equal participation of women in society. In theory, this might be true because women are more knowledgeable than men regarding the needs of the population, especially the poor. But successful political participation also depends on the public environment. Traditions and cultures as well as religions very often hinder women's access to power. Local governance is closely linked with the empowerment of voiceless groups, such as the poor and women. Decentralisation may enable women to participate in decision-making, but unless gender equity is an explicit objective, existing gender imbalances may simply be replicated.

However, there is progress in their political participation world-wide. This is despite the fact that only 18.5 percent of the parliamentarians are women. Rwanda and the Nordic countries are the big exceptions, with more than 40 percent participation. Also, the offices of State President and Prime Minister are still far from being in the hands of women: not even ten percent of the leading figures in the 192 member states of the UN family are women. And the EU has fewer female leaders than the AU countries.

Decentralisation may function and contribute to good governance if both women and men are participating in local decision-making. But there could be a problem: often, the local elite tries to get hold of local power. Because of traditions and perceptions of women's role in society, the population do not give women the rights they are entitled to. Here, there is still a long way to go.

One of our project partners told the Marie Schlei association that in Kigoma, Tanzania, for example, nobody appreciated the work done daily by women. After special training and with access to credit, some of the women organised themselves, started projects alongside their daily work and earned money, sometimes even more than men. Gradually, husbands started encouraging their wives to be involved in the projects and do more. Sometimes, the husbands even started to help with the household. Now, in Kigoma, the first women are attempting to engage in local politics. To them, there is still no social justice when they see that men get the land title or better quality land, easy access to water and the support of public services. They are also more affected by the lack of public transport and security in order to tap more and more profitable markets. So prejudices in a society can undermine the efficient and effective contribution of women in rural areas to fighting poverty and underdevelopment. However, the economic success of women can contribute to role changes and their political participation. Thus women's concerns get on the agenda, and their political influence in decision-making grows.

Many women first engage in politics at local or municipal level. However, recent decentralisation trends have not necessarily led to greater participation of women in local councils or as mayors of towns and villages. In fact, the findings of recent research by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) indicate that even where there are quotas, women are often treated as proxies for male family members or are simply ignored while the real decisions take place when women are not in the room. While there are shining exceptions – some women have been extremely influential at local level, such as women in Senegal or in France – there is more to do to improve the capacity of women to participate effectively in local decision-making and to empower them.

Female participation in politics can only be successful if

- quota system facilitate the access to political posts;
- women networks promote women;
- women's interests are clearly addressed;
- women's interests are linked to the concrete needs of the people;
- women get financial funds, training and publicity;
- women themselves empower themselves.

In recent years, developing countries have increased the democratic basis of sub-national governments, often complementing the restoration or deepening of democracy at national level. Local governance is believed to enhance both the legitimacy of government by strengthening participation and accountability in policy-making and the efficiency of public services by improving information, input and oversight. Therefore, decentralisation is in the interest of women.