

Women's Influence on Public Policy and Governance

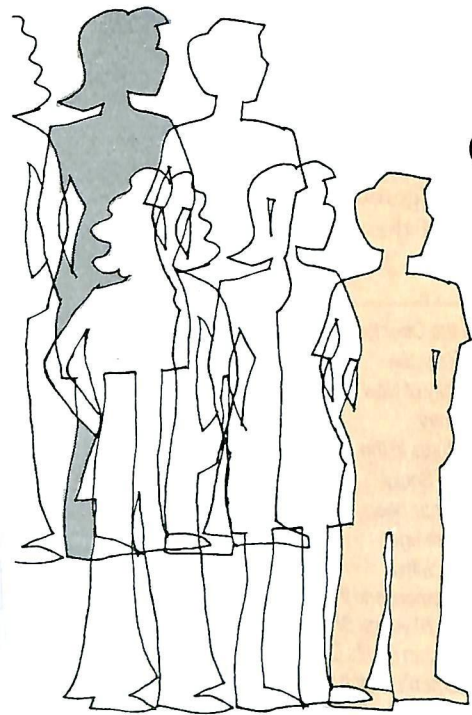
by Anne Marie Goetz

In the past decade, women's visibility in and impact on public life has grown. Although the average proportion of women in national assemblies has only increased from nine per cent to almost 16 per cent in 16 countries, the proportion has reached 30 per cent or more. What factors promote women's access to representative politics? Do women in public office really promote women's interests in public decision-making? Under what conditions can they and their male allies be effective in producing gender-sensitive public policy?

During the last 10 years, there has been considerable experimentation with the use of affirmative action in order to meet the goal of gender parity in representative politics. Quotas on party electoral lists are now in use in over 80 countries using proportional representation. These are most effective where there are large electoral districts and requirements that women are spaced evenly on lists. In simple plurality systems, measures to reserve seats for women have been preferred over quotas

of women candidates. Parties on the ideological left, or those willing to commit the public sector to compensating for inequalities in the private sphere have, in general, been more responsive to gender-equality concerns and supportive of women in politics.

Despite women's greater prominence in political life, women in public office have, in many cases, yet to parlay their visibility into leadership positions and influence over the decision-making process: there are still many instances where they are simply used as an extension of male power structures. The transition from a heightened presence of women in politics to advance for gender-equality issues and women-friendly policies depends on the effectiveness of women's movements in holding governments accountable, and on the capacity of public sector agencies to translate ambitious gender-equity policy agendas into effective implementation—a matter of gender-sensitive good governance.



Women Mobilising to Reshape Democracy

A notable feature of women's associational activity in the past decade has been the central role that women have played in many democratisation struggles. Transitions to democratic forms of government in Latin America and South Africa have enabled women to claim space for gender equality in newly emerging or reformed institutions. Though women's movements diverge on many issues, there has been a patch of common ground on which many converge: the demand for gender parity in public office. Since late 1990s, civil society campaigns for equal representation (*of women-Ed.*) with men have gathered momentum, backing reforms to electoral systems that support women's ability to run for office.

While political liberalisation has enabled some women's movements to flourish, in some contexts it has been accompanied by loss of momentum in feminist politics. In Eastern Europe, for example, it has taken most of the time since the transitions to democracy for women's movements to recover from their earlier associations with repressive regimes. In other contexts, where political liberalisation has been only partial, disillusionment with states that fail to deliver either development or democracy appears to have contributed to women's deepening engagement with conservative ethnic and religious movements.

Some of these identity-based forms of mobilisation assert the superiority of "traditional" gender roles along with systems of patriarchal authority, particularly where "women's liberation" is seen as part of unwelcome modernisation. Women's deportment, mobility, dress, and roles within the family are often central to the cultural revival or pious society that these groups proclaim. Although women are rarely given access to institutional power within these groups, they are encouraged to engage in mobilisational activity and even to become highly militant and visible activists because of their great symbolic impact.

Gender and "Good" Governance

Programmes of governance reform have recently attracted considerable international and national attention. Good governance is seen as the essential condition enabling economic reforms to unfold effectively, and is at the core of the emerging "post-Washington consensus." Although the reform packages of the international financial institutions address issues of government legitimacy and the public participation of socially excluded groups, critics believe these are dominated by a narrower preoccupation: the use of "governance" reforms to expand market activity and its supporting institutions, especially private property rights. This

While political liberalisation has enabled some women's movements to flourish, in some contexts it has been accompanied by loss of momentum in feminist politics.

Although experience is mixed, there are signs that women in local government are having a tangible impact on local spending patterns and in building social acceptance of women's political authority.

focus often leaves out consideration of the effects of public institutional reform on women's rights.

Women's associations across the world have prioritised several areas for gender-sensitive public sector reform. These include recruitment quotas to ensure a greater presence of women in the bureaucracy; the introduction of gender equity concerns in performance measurement; consultation with women clients of public services; measures to respond to the women's complaints; and reforms to legal frameworks and judicial systems to improve women's access to justice.

Women are expected to benefit from the improvements in accountability and service delivery that decentralisation reforms should provide. Indeed, local government positions are expected to be particularly open to women because for these positions, women do not face the mobility and financial constraints that they do when they seek national public office. However, comparison of available statistics on women's

engagement at national and local levels shows that this is not consistently the case—sometimes there are more women in national than in local politics. This alerts us to the significance of resistance to women from traditional patriarchal systems at local levels and also to the importance of gender-sensitive institutional design that improves women's access to local government forums and services.

Systems of affirmative action that have been tried include the reservation of a proportion of seats on local councils for women, as in India, and the creation of special electoral wards for women, as in Uganda. Although experience is mixed, there are signs that women in local government are having a tangible impact on local spending patterns and in building social acceptance of women's political authority. In some settings, spending patterns have shifted toward the provision of services and amenities favoured by women, such as water supplies and public health. Local government remains a key arena to watch over the next decade, as more and more women assert their leadership ambitions and challenge patriarchal systems at this level. ☺

Anne Marie Goetz is a fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK. She coordinated the background research for and wrote "Women in politics and public life," section three of "Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World," UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) 2005.

Reprinted from: UNRISD News 27, 2005, pp.4-5