



GENDER AND GOVERNANCE: EMPOWERING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Context

Gender equality is built-in governance. Both women and men have equality of rights under the law, equality of opportunity, including equality in access to capabilities and other productive resources that enable opportunity, and equality of voice to influence and contribute to development process (World Bank: 2001). Equal participation by both men and women in governance is essential for a number of reasons, viz.,

- Influence the allocation of scarce resources;
- Improve living conditions and promote the interests of women;
- Shift the political focus towards issues affecting the quality of life of both men & women by ensuring equitable distribution of productive resources and opportunities for growth, giving visibility to reproductive roles of women in policy making and increasing women's participation in the political process. (Commonwealth Foundation: 2004)

Beijing Platform for Action (1995) clearly mentions that without the active participation of women and incorporation of the perspectives of women in all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality and development cannot be achieved. (Panda: 2004) The affirmative action within India in terms of one-third reservations of seats for them in local level governance processes is one such process. The rationale underlying this affirmative action is to build a critical mass of women leadership in the decision-making in order to make meaningful difference to the outcomes of governance.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 enabled 33 percent representation of women in Panchayats (village councils) and Municipalities. An unprecedented number of women occupying leadership positions in local bodies and participating actively the local political process is a reality now. Beginning with the first round of elections to Panchayats after the states passed conformity legislations in 1994, nearly one million elected women are occupying constitutionally mandated public offices. In most states, with the third round of Panchayat elections approximately three million elected women would acquire a leadership position in local bodies. (Tandon: 2004)

Gender and Governance: Issues

Like race, ethnicity and class, gender as a social category shapes and establishes ones life chances in society and development. The term *gender* refers to a set of roles, attributes behaviours expected from women and men by their societies. *Gender relations* represent the ways in which the *socially constructed* categories of women and men relate over a wide range of social interactions within family, community as well as in all economic and political relations in a given society. Gender relations are institutionally constructed. It creates and reproduces systemic differences in the positioning of women and men in the society. Rules, norms and practices of gender relations have a strong ideological content as it reflects the normative or prescriptive version of female and male roles. Gender relations are constituted in terms of relations of power and dominance; therefore, the nature of gender relations is one of opposition and conflict and often takes the form of male dominance and female subordination.



Gender is a salient factor in participation and representation in public decision-making. Both women and men need to participate and be active in decision-making and policy formulation. The nation-states, world over, guarantee all its citizens the right to political equality. The criteria of equality between sexes afford women the right to participate and represent in formal political decision-making without any discrimination. But do women really participate equally with men in policy and decision-making bodies?

The discourses, procedures, structures and functions of governance are, in general, heavily skewed in favour of men. Women and men do not have equal social, economic and legal rights. Women still lack independent rights to own land, manage property, conduct business or even travel without their husband's consent. Women continue to have poor command over a range of productive resources including education, land, information and financial resources. Limited access to resources and weaker capabilities constrain women's power to influence resource allocation and investment decisions at home, in their community and at national level. Women remain vastly underrepresented in national and local government. (World Bank: 2001)

Factors Constraining Participation of Women in Governance

A noteworthy factor responsible for non-participation of women in the decision-making and governance is *unequal gender relations*. Gender relations and power distribution between the sexes in both the private (personal) and public spheres create gender inequalities. Unequal gender relations, reproduced across the range of inter-related institutions as household, community, market and state, mediate the construction of gender identities and synergistically determine the capacities to exercise independent agency. Such relationships determine and influence the ways resources, roles and responsibilities are allocated; values are assigned and power is mobilised. Without any sense of power whatsoever, their participation in decision-making is generally minimal not only in political sphere but also at home and within the community.

Private-public divide associated with women and men have always hindered women to negotiate in the public domain. The private domain associated with household, reproductive work and femininity, whereas, the public domain is associated with political authority, public decision-making, productive work and masculinity. Women are either being criticized for their inadequacies or patronized by men.

Autonomy of women in family/household, also influences their status and ability to participate in governance. Development policies often conceptualize altruist, conflict free, harmonious households where production, income, consumption are equally shared. Empirical studies, on the contrary, have shown that far from being a unit where all resources and benefits are pooled and shared equitably, the use of resources and labour, distribution and output have to be constantly negotiated within the households. Intra household relations are often conflictive. The bargaining power is derived from options available to household members, the perceptions of contributions by members to the household prosperity and the degree to which members identify their self-interests within their personal well being. Although, the private domain of household is typically associated with women, men are held responsible for the welfare and safety of all members. Women's bargaining power at the household is restricted typically due to lack of access and control over resources, no autonomy in decision making,

low self esteem, low skills and education, restricted physical mobility and eventually less power as compared to men.

Other intersecting hierarchies such as *class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and rural/urban locations* further complicate gender inequality in governance. In India, for example, women face hurdles posed by patriarchy, caste and class when they enter political domain. Women from low caste groups, despite reservations, seldom wielded any real political power due to the strongly entrenched notions of caste and gender hierarchy. (Anandhi S: 2002) Studies have also shown that women elected representatives with no economic entitlements were often under the control of those who owned and controlled resources (usually males). Consequently, dependency curbed their independent decision-making powers. (Niranjana: 2002)

The existence of persistent discrimination against women and inequality between women and men requires that engendering governance strategies be by and large complemented with targeted interventions on women's empowerment. Definition of empowerment ranges from increasing choices available to and capacities of women to transforming the power structures of society. It is assumed that by increasing women's choices, capacities, decision-making power, women's right and gender equality can be realized at all levels of decision-making.

Missing women in development processes clearly indicates that public decision-making processes have not actually addressed the strategic needs of women in the context of gender relations. Amartya Sen urges to look at women as agents of change and not as passive beneficiaries. Agency is the ability to define & articulate needs and priorities and to act upon them. Female agency implies the role of women as a member of the public and participant in economic, social and political action. (Sen: 1999) A paper presented by Commonwealth Foundation to the meeting of Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's' Affairs in 2000 notes:

If the desired outcome of good governance is distributional equity then gender equality should stand high on the agenda of any government. (Commonwealth Foundation: 2004)

Netherlands-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000 explicitly put forward that a gender sensitive governance means (a) increased participation of women in governance institutions and decision-making processes, freedom of association and space for an active women's movement (b) transparent and accountable gender equity in the allocation of resources and power (c) legislation of gender equality and the promotion and protection of women's rights and (d) gender sensitive policies and institutional structures (Commonwealth Foundation: 2004)

Gender Mainstreaming

The concept of bringing gender issues into the mainstream of society has been clearly established as a global strategy for promoting gender equality in the development agenda. Mainstreaming is not just about adding a "women's" component into an existing activity. *Mainstreaming goes beyond increasing women's participation... bringing together the experience, knowledge and interests of men and women to build upon the development agenda. Gender mainstreaming requires that all policy, planning, implementation and*



resource allocation reflect the interests and the views of both women as well as men. (Alkazi et al: 2004) Several efforts have been made across the world to ensure that development policy makers take note of the existing gender inequalities and proactively act towards addressing them.

Before the Decade for Women, development essentially had a *welfare* approach, addressing the practical needs of women surrounding their reproductive role through delivery of food, family planning, health care, etc. The *Women in Development (WID)* approach, ushered in during the Decade for Women, was initially conceived as an *equity* approach. This approach recognised women's active role in the 'development process as reproductive, productive and community workers, and emphasised the fulfilment of their strategic needs through direct state intervention. However, due to its political nature, this approach was not very acceptable to governments, and was soon replaced by an *anti-poverty* approach. The *efficiency* approach sought to enhance women's contribution to the development process in order to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of project interventions, albeit it tended to assume that women's time and energy are elastic. The *empowerment* approach considered women's improved condition and position to be the ends in themselves. It focused on meeting women's strategic needs focusing on a bottom-up, self-reliant approach. The equity and empowerment approaches together labelled as *Gender and Development (GAD)* approaches because of their emphasis on strategic needs. *GAD* changed the focus and interventions from women as a target group to *gender analysis of women and men's roles and relations as part of all development interventions, and to gender equality as a goal of development.* (Alkazi et al: 2004) More recently, a *rights-based approach* sets the achievement of human rights and the creation of an enabling environment in which human rights 'can be enjoyed as the main objectives of people-centred sustainable development, as well as the means to achieve it. In this way, a rights-based approach transcends sectoral concerns, and encompasses the concepts of *welfare, anti poverty, equity* and *empowerment* as facets of the rights of all people. (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre: 2000)

In India, if one were to examine the measures taken that have been undertaken by the state to engender governance, quotas or reservations are the most prominent. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (CAA) of 1992 enabled 33 percent representation of women in Panchayats and Municipalities and ensured their entry in the domain of politics. While the Article 243G & 243W of the Constitution empowered the State Legislatures to endow Panchayats/municipalities with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as institutions of self-government, the provision of reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women (Article 243D & 243T) gave an opportunity to them to hold formal positions of power and, in turn, participate in the decision making process. The political restructuring and affirmative action have given the rural women an opportunity for participation in the political decision-making. Women not only have one-third membership, they also head as chairpersons in one third of the Panchayats.

The impetus for empowerment came from the State to 'enable women to make strategic life choices, organize and participate in and influence the process of decision-making as per their needs and priorities.' (Deshmukh-Ranadive: 2005) Since Indian rural women by and large experience marginalisation, deprivation and oppression vis-à-vis the existing power structures, it is assumed that affirmative action will build a critical mass of local leadership who will be active participants in the strategic decision-making process. The political



representation will give them the voice and a solidarity base to change initial gender-biased preferences and help in formulating democratic policies. The constitutionally mandated Panchayats and constitutionally mandated participation of women will change the power concentration.

Studies on women elected representatives in the post-73rd & 74th CAA phase, have reported mixed impacts. On the positive side we find that women despite their low level of literacy became articulate. They began asserting control over resources. They regularly attended local body meetings. In many instances they have even used their elected authority to address several critical issues such as children’s education, drinking water facilities, family planning facilities, hygiene and health, quality of health care and village development such as *pucca* road and electricity in their areas. They have also brought alcohol abuse and domestic violence on to the agenda of political campaigns (Nambiar and Bandyopadhyay: 2004).

These profiles of active participation also co-exist with reverse stories of inert participation. Some of the factors such as intra-household gender relations, caste and livelihood issues, the masculinity of political processes, construing men as the only real political actors, the public and private forms of violence exercised by men against women and mandatory rotation of reserved seats have curbed and controlled their self-determining and risk-taking behaviours in the political process. According to a PRIA’s study on PRIs, the male family members who previously were elected representatives of the Panchayats often pushed women to contest election so that the seat and the power could be retained within the family. As a result, women behaved as mere token representatives (dummy candidates) (PRIA: 1999). There are evidences of women elected representatives becoming the targets of character assassination. Their male colleagues in the meetings still treat them with indifference. The bureaucracy does not hold them in the same esteem as would give to the male elected representatives. It is clearly evident that numerical presence of women in leadership positions in the local bodies does not necessarily mean enhanced participation of women in governance.

It is clear that decentralization as initiated by state has not actually guaranteed equality of voice, access or influences in the decision-making within local governance. The gap between the formal recognition of right to participate and its actualisation remains large. Gendered identities & practices have often acted as forces for exclusion of women from leadership positions by limiting their capacities to articulate and act upon their claims and concerns. The authority structures of the governance institutions are not gender-neutral. They are essentially built on conventionally male ideals.

Agency of Women Elected Representatives: Discussions

Women in Panchayats and ULBs are getting exposed to process of governance and consequently getting a sense of intimacy with and control over governance process. Exposure to the ways of governance has instilled in them a sense of power. To be called a sarpanch or panch or councillor was an experience in living an independent identity. This may be seen as gains in terms of the consolidation of the gender equality, though the gain has not expanded over the years. A careful reading of the data, however, alerts us to the limitations of the gender mainstreaming in governance.



Equality of opportunity to women in local self-governance has not actually transformed the prevailing institutional practices (relations), which still emphasise male dominance. Gender mainstreaming has not gone beyond the level of rhetoric. An analysis of emerging issues not only explains ways in which women are constrained from exercising their leadership but also suggests ways to overcome the constraints.

Feminisation of leadership

Mandatory one-third reservation for women has increased their presence in governance but their voices are silent. Study result shows a most of the WERs did not have previous experience in politics. They lacked technical expertise, organizational and communication skill. A small minority received training. They had little awareness about rural and urban development/ administration affairs. New entrants faced unfriendly environment in carrying out their duties attached to their office. Vice-presidents, husbands, sons and male family members or others dominated them for planning and executing the powers of local self-governance.

The constitutional mandate has not adequately addressed the needs and rights of WERs. The realities of gender inequality restricted WERs ability to exercise their agency. The responsibilities to meet the household subsistence requirements, mobility restrictions and limited support structures restricted their social interaction and participation in local self-governance. Domestication and seclusion ethics undermined their potential for holding public office. Having no formal educational qualifications, being deficient in information, skills and inexperience, they are dependent on men both within household and the institutions of local self-governance (LSGIs) in matters relating to governance. Men exploit their naivety to their advantage. The social image of women as housewives renders the work of many WERs invisible. Organizational resources are steered toward quantitative targets i.e. increasing the number of women in leadership positions. The engendering process has become ‘add women’ process without questioning the basic assumptions, strategic objectives, or ways of working towards institutional change for gender equality.

Limits of Policy Imperatives

The Affirmative Policy in the form of reservation of seats for women has both enhanced their participation as well as obstructed it. The study findings show that while women have gained entry mainly because of number of seats reserved for them, the very provision has been manipulated by men, either the family members or currently serving in office, as well as the political parties devised ways of capturing women seats. They needed a namesake representative, hence, sponsored compliant women. The family members & political parties who sponsored them did not really invest in developing their capacities because their usefulness did not extend beyond immediate term of office. The study findings also show that WERs were first timers. Politically active families, male relatives officiated on their behalf. Women as proxy representatives have reduced affirmative action to mere tokenism.

Policies of rotation, two-child norm and the absence of honorarium policy constrained the agency of WERs. For instance, rotation policy de-motivated them. WERs in the study contested only from reserved seats. They were not sure whether they would get a second chance to implement the lessons learnt from the general unreserved seats. Absence of honorarium policy inhibited their participation. WERs were mostly poor engaged in

household subsistence activities either in the field or in some income generating work. Attending meetings, visiting block level officials or taking training meant loss of a days' wage. Honorarium policy could help them as they were putting in a major amount of time in the activities of Panchayats/Municipalities. WERs, as the study findings have indicated, did not attend meetings or training camps organised because they were being organised at a distant place. They had to depend on family members to escort them. Provision of honorarium could also address problems related to mobility. Policy of two-child norm violated their right to participate as elected representatives. Several states had passed a provision prohibiting contestants to PRIs if they have more than two children. Women bore the brunt of it. Many women (20-40 age group) were barred from contesting. There is an urgent need to seek a review of judgments of High Courts/Supreme Court in this regard. Now some state governments are thinking of requiring basic literacy as minimum qualification for contesting elections to PRIs; besides being unconstitutional, such provisions will further discriminate against women.

Internalised Self-Image

Women's cognitive experiences about themselves and their role as elected representatives reflect a given structural situation. Internalisation of dominating ideologies and stereotypes about gender roles, values and behaviour deterred women to take on active leadership roles. Many WERs described themselves as housewives with no sense of independent identity. Low self-esteem has made them passive, dependent on men in matters relating to governance.

Interlocking of Private and Public Patriarchy

WERs are not looked as independent political agents. Their participation is tokenistic. Study findings clearly indicate that systemic patriarchy perpetuated the gender bias and powerlessness in WERs. Constraints within households directly influenced their capacity for public engagements. The mobility constraints have prompted the men in their lives (husbands, brothers, fathers, and fathers-in-law) to take up their job such as visiting Panchayat Samiti offices at block headquarters. They became *de-facto* head or members of panchayats and municipalities when "their" women got elected. Ambivalence about their public role as elected representatives and dependency on male family members rendered their participation in governance meaningless. They functioned as 'add on' who came to politics only because of policy imperatives.

Every day practices of MERs, Govt officials, as the study findings have indicated, construe men as the only real political actors, thereby excluding WERs from actual exercise of power. When women make an effort to assert themselves, local government functionaries (like panchayat secretary) prefer to deal with the men-folk, instead of women elected representatives. The patriarchal nature of local administration reinforces a sense of worthlessness among these women. The masculinity of political processes, the adversarial proceedings, subtle forms of coercion to conform to the central interests of MERs, the timing of meetings and sessions, the pervasiveness of patronage etc curb and control women leaders' self-determining behaviour.

One common expression of 'significant others' in the study has been *women are unfit for public life because it is essentially male in character*. Public-private divide perpetuated by local governance bodies prevent women from being full participants in these organizations.

The relegation of women to the private world of the household is so deeply embedded in the institutions of local self-governance that even though they have become elected representatives, political office continues to be the preserve of men. Deeply ingrained gender relations construct women as those whose voice is unreliable. Mostly cast as wives, daughters and sisters under the care of men, they are not taken seriously as political agents.

Civil Society as political learning ground

Though caste associations, membership to various groups and political parties eased their entry into politics, such forms of civil society, however, did not actually support their independent agency. They co-opted WERs for their vested interests and created in them the feelings of being obliged to them for their positions. Pro-active engagement of CBOs like women collectives, on the contrary, enabled WERs to work confidently. As the study findings have revealed that WERs associated with them were more confident, articulate about their concerns and constraints. Continuous interaction with them enabled them to deal with issues of women's empowerment, corruption and generating unity amongst people.

Institutional Inadequacies

Women's representation in local government structures does not automatically result in their informed and effective participation in these structures. The simplistic appeals for increased participation of women generally overlook the institutional inadequacies such as the timings of meetings, problems of quorum and procedures adopted for finalizing development plans and projects, articulations of their priorities and issues in the meetings, the quality of deliberations and manipulation of discussions by dominant groups, rules for filing nominations and travel allowances, etc. Consequently, women including the elected representatives rarely attend local body meetings and hardly ever articulate their priorities.

Knowledge, training, and education as resources enable women to act their agency. Empowerment as the processes of learning and action strengthens the self-esteem, analytical skills, competencies and political consciousness. The marginalized and excluded citizens gain a sense of their rights and join together to transform inequitable power relations of power and develop more democratic societies. WERs need to be politically enlightened, not only about their rights and duties but also the nature of our constitution, democratic process and values, working of democratic institutions, concept and relevance of local body administration, particularly the message of present 73rd & 74th CAAs and one third of reservation of seats for women and various poverty alleviation programmes and policies for women and weaker sections. Our findings reveal that those who received training were able to exercise their leadership effectively. However, systematic orientation and capacity enhancement of elected women has been largely ignored.

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