Promoting Gender Equality in Local Government (Asia)

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Abstract

The struggle for gender equality has evolved over centuries of economic progress increasing social and political awareness regarding gender roles and inequities, and concerted efforts to overcome them. International developments have been critical in shaping the governments and policy-makers in individual countries. The women in Development (WID) approach replaced an earlier approach that focused on women's welfare. Economic liberalization and globalization in South Asia have ushered in winds of change in social and political spheres, preparing opportunities for greater participation of women in local governance.

The countries of South Asia- India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Malaysia- share commonalities in terms of history, culture and social values. It is home to about a quarter of the world's population, but has 43 percent of the world's poor. The region has experienced overall improvement in all the main development indicators over the last decade, yet power structures which have a tendency to be hierarchical and patriarchal, continue to obstruct progress and wield considerable influence in the government and state apparatuses. Over the last decade, the governments of the region have taken some proactive, though sometimes cautious steps towards revitalizing local-self government institutions on the basis of modern, democratic principles. All countries have atleast officially acknowledged the need to give representation to women on elected local bodies, succumbing to the pressure by international organizations and programmes like the UN International Women's Conferences and the Millennium Development Goals.

However, there is still a long way to go before there is true equality in South Asia. In order to get there, it is necessary to formulate a plan of Action by and for the local governments in South Asia that is regularly monitored. The most important task ahead involves gender sensitization of governance; gender budgeting and its monitoring; capacity building combined with developing an resource database; and global networking among women in local governments and other related networks. Only then the agenda for promoting gender equality among women in South Asia can be truly successful.

Introduction:

Gender imbalances in decision-making power, access to resources, rights and entitlements for women, either by law or by custom, mean women in many countries still lack basic rights to property, education and therefore the right to make choices in life. Despite economic progress in many countries, women are under-represented in decision-making at all levels from the household to public life. Addressing these inequalities through law and public policies is a way of formalizing the goal of gender equality. Legal changes which most countries have now implemented, are necessary to institute gender equality, but never sufficient to create lasting changes without close monitoring. Addressing the gaps between international declarations, what the law prescribes and what actually occurs often requires broad, integrated advocacy campaigns and partnership and coalition building, at local, national and international levels.

Global initiatives on promoting Gender Equality:

The road to empowerment of women is a path that has developed over the course of many years, as society has adapted to the realization that gender equality is necessary and international efforts to secure this; and have in the modern context been critical in impacting South Asian Governments and policy-makers to a great extent.

In the early 1970's the women in Development (WID) approach replaced the earlier approach. The 1975 conference held in Mexico City legitimized the international women's movement by elevating women's issues to visible international debate. The UN General assembly adopted the

world plan of Action formulated by the world conference of the international women's year and proclaimed 1976 to 1985 as the decade for women, equality, development and peace.

During 1985, Third World Conference on women in Nairobi, the UN reaffirmed its commitment to ending discrimination against women. In 1984, UN created a voluntary fund the decade of women and it was renamed the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and placed under the organizational umbrella of the United Nations development Programe (UNDP).

In 1997, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) defined gender mainstreaming as the process of assessing the implications for women, men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any areas and at all levels.

The Beijing Declaration and Follow-Up:

In 1995, ten years after the decade on women had ended, the Beijing conference focused on "Action for Equality, development and peace". At the conference, 189 governments committed themselves to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making and to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

Millennium Development Goals:

The millennium Development goals (MDGs) were drawn up by the international community responding to the world's main development challenges specifically concerning poverty reduction and inequitable development. Member states of the United Nations adopted the millennium declaration in September 2000. It contains 8 goals, ranging from eradicating extreme poverty to combating HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases. The singing of the millennium declaration and the development of the MDGs confirmed that gender equality has been mainstreamed into international goal setting. Gender equality has multi-faceted and positive ramifications. Female education raises the age of marriage, reduces family size and ensures superior care and nutrition for children and also provides immunity against disease-prone behavior and problems arising out of ignorance.

The Global gender, Gap report, 2006:

In May 2005, the world Economic Forum (WEF) launched its first study attempting to assess the size of the gender gap in 58 countries using economic, educational, health and political-based criteria. The index shows that no country in the world has yet reached equality between women and men in critical areas such as economic participation, education, health and political empowerment.

The Philippines is distinctive for being the only Asian country holding a place among the top ten of the rankings. Good performance on all four categories leads to the Philippines high position in the rankings. The next highest ranking country from the region is Srilanka performing well due to having reached parity on health and being among the top on political empowerment. Finally, large, highly populated nations hold some of the lowest positions in the Asian rankings. Their ranking reflect large disparities between men amd women on all four areas of the index although they all display good performance on political empowerment with Bangladesh, India and Pakistan surpassing even the United States and Japan on this variable.

Governance, Empowerment and Gender:

Governance is a term that in recent years has taken an increasingly prominent position in development discourses as a pattern shift occurred from an earlier more exclusive focus on government to a focus on governance.

Empowerment strategies in relation to the position of women in local governance in particular are critical. In many countries, to differing degrees, women face problems different to men in terms of health, education, housing and basic services. Women are often caught in a situation of having to work for financial reasons and also maintain their domestic obligations. This can make them vulnerable to economic shocks within a country and may mean that young girls are forced to work rather than school. In most countries, the number of women in national parliaments is low and that applies equally to state-level government bodies. There is a severe imbalance in this context where women are not amply involved in overall decision making processes on local governance issues like preparation of budgets for gender specific issues or involvement on. At

the same time women can face problems due to lack of basic services such as shelter, water, public health care, sanitation, garbage collection, education, child care centers, credit assistance etc, which can become far more important when they have children.

South Asian Perspective on women in local Government:

Women in local governance have acquired significance in the political sphere of the countries of the South Asian region. It has also become critical in the expanding and deepening democracy in the region where politics has been traditionally perceived as a male domain. The cultural and ethnic diversity that most of the countries of the region encompass also makes the question of local government not merely a desirable ideal but also a political necessity if they are to be accommodated in a democratic framework wherein the human rights of individuals' communities can be upheld. South Asian societies are though, still predominantly rural and traditional power structures, which are hierarchical and patriarchal, continue to wield considerable influence on the government and state apparatuses. Governments of the region have taken some considered steps over the last decade towards revitalizing of local government institutions in their respective countries on the basis of modern, democratic principles. Inspite of some notable successes, the measures taken towards decentralization of the polities and taking various forms of affirmative action to overcome gender-based exclusions have had limited progress.

Women in Local Governance Structures:

The percentage of women local councilors is stated CLGF to be as follows; in USA 23%, in Europe 20%, in Canada 20%, less than 5% in Africa and 3.8% in Latin America. In South Asia it is frequently found that there are quota systems in place that stipulate 30% representation of women in local government e.g. India and Pakistan. In Mauritius, women councilors represent roughly 8% of the total and in Srilanka 2%. However there is evidence of poor retention rates and high turnover of women in local government, resulting from the difficulties women face in balancing their responsibilities at home and at work with their political engagements.

Therefore an important first step towards gaining full gender balance at a national level is to perform a bottom-up exercise in gender balance and female inclusion in the political sphere; as this, along with other factors, will feed into the wider political discourse and influence future measures to ensure representative gender balance on the national levels.

Support for Urban Women's Activities through Participatory Urban Policy:

Women's livelihood activities in urban areas support their communities' social and economic well-being but often go unrecognized or supported. In the process of urbanization in developing countries, women's traditional roles of supplying water, fuel, food and other items for domestic consumption are heavily constrained by the lack of services in informal and unplanned settlements. Female elected representatives have been reported to be more supportive of issues of basic service delivery and livelihoods of poor women, and this need to be given priority in local governance decision-making processes. Wide spread poverty alleviation measures and other programmes to support micro-enterprises assist urban poor women and imply a shift in urban governance towards establishing pro-active approaches to achieving equality and independence.

In this context, a review of local government by-laws form a gender perspective should be done, including representatives and organizations from low- income and informal settlements. Further, policy review forums in low-income urban settlements can be established by the women elected members, ensuring women's interests are identified and included in strategic plans that local authorities can implement in collaboration with communities. Strategically this would involve encouraging and supporting women, especially young women in running for electoral office; and also to support women who have been elected to office. Support structures can be identified in relation to-

- Help in family care responsibilities;

- Interacting with political parties;

- Liaising with the media.

Capacity Building for Elected Members:

Some fundamental principles of good local governance, such as representative local government; responsive local government; proximity of administration to people; principles of subsidiary, financial autonomy, participatory planning etc in local governance are important. Aspirations and demands of citizens living in cities and villages have considerably increased, with better amenities and improved services expected. In this context, elected representatives play an important role in civic governance. They have to act as mediators and supports of citizens' initiatives, facilitate basic services, raise civic finances, and interact with citizens so as to make themselves more responsive to needs on the ground.

Local government policy needs to be driven by a bottom-up process that involves citizens and recognizes community – based organizations, including women's organizations, as legitimate stakeholders in urban governance. The UN-Habitat agenda recognizes community-based organizations (CBO'S) as major partners in designing, implementing and monitoring human settlements strategies, including gender issues and women's empowerment. Unfortunately, policy-making decisions are often restricted to the experience and recommendations of those in positions of power, who may not directly articulate the concerns of the urban poor, among whom women and women's organizations play an active role. This means that women's concerns largely remain invisible and neglected. There is also a resulting loss in effective use of community resources and potential failure of policy.

The women and Habitat programme and local leadership and management programme of UN-Habitat have developed manuals and conducted training aimed at building the capacity of women. UNDP has developed a gender and development capacity building programme aimed at equipping governments with the pre-requisite skills in gender mainstreaming. Various international, regional and national women's networks have embarked on civic education programmes at local level. Donor agencies and bi-laterals have also allocated resources towards women and community based organizations' capacity building initiatives. Sharing of information and collective learning on existing activities designed to build the capacity of women at grassroots level would be valuable.

Gender Budgeting:

The Budget is an important tool for affirmative action for improvement of gender relations through reduction of the gender gap in development. It can help to reduce economic inequalities, between men and women as well as between the rich and the poor. Budgetary policies need to take into consideration the gender dynamics operating in the economy and in civil society. There is a need to highlight participatory approaches to pro-poor budgeting, local and global implications of pro-poor and pro-women budgeting, alternative macro scenarios emerging out of alternative budgets and inter-linkages between gender-sensitive budgeting and women's empowerment.

It is critical that gender budgeting be included in urban policy and programme planning at all levels. Effective budgets are fundamental to the implementation of social, political and economic policies and priorities. Policy makers need to find ways to re-direct resources to areas and groups previously under-resourced.. Generating a more comprehensive set of gender data within city jurisdictions will assist local government officials in consistently focusing resources in a gender conscious way. Capacity building by and for local authorities in urban governance will help ensure that they are able to effectively use the gender information at their disposal.

Roadmap for the Future:

The empowerment of women and their engagement in local governance through elected representation, appointment to senior positions in local government and through associational life in the locality shapes policy made and policy outcomes. Since the early 1990s there has been a trend towards decentralization, and especially democratic decentralization. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have all been innovative using legislative measures to set quotas for women's representation in local councils. The policy impact of this has been visible, but in some ways limited. All commonwealth governments have agreed a target of at least thirty percent of women in all walks of life, including elected local government and throughout all levels of staff and management.

Through differing techniques, but making use of legislative powers, India and Pakistan have reached the thirty percent threshold. Bangladesh is just short and Sri Lanka falls very short. The introduction of elected representatives at the local level in Malaysia and the Maldives has not yet taken place. Little is known about the representation of women on the staff side of local government. To get started on developing strategies political parties can adopt policies to promote and train women within their ranks. Local government can ensure that they have an outreach programme to educate young women and attract them into local governance. Gender issues do not relate just to women, it is about a policy shift across the whole council. Gender sensitization or training of all local government staff and elected members is required. This is especially true of senior decision makers- elected and employed men. This would help to change attitudes, but also equip staff and councillor with the skills to scrutinize policy and ensure that it has the desired gender impact.

Conclusion:

The culmination of these activities is a local government environment that challenges itself to be more gender sensitive and is keen to ensure that all citizens are treated equitably. All stakeholders need to develop strategies to empower women in and into local government. To ensure that these strategies are effective, it is important that stakeholders at local, state/ provincial and national levels are developed in partnership.

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