

Giving Women Voice in Local Governance Structures

Introduction

Asia and the Pacific has made good strides in improving women's political participation and representation in national and local level governance structures over the last decade. There are now more female parliamentarians, more women in local decision-making bodies, and more local women leaders. However, most countries have yet to achieve the international aspirational targets of 30% women in national parliaments. Across the region, many countries exhibit higher levels of female political representation at the subnational level compared with that at the national level, suggesting there is more political space for women at lower levels of government.

Discriminatory practices, social norms, and cultural perceptions that women are not well suited for leadership and decision-making positions, combined with family and child-care responsibilities, discourage and limit women's involvement in politics. Women's limited participation in political decision making acts as a barrier to making policy and service delivery more responsive to women's needs and more accountable to women. It is now widely recognized that women's representation and voices in decision-making bodies—as leaders and participants—can contribute to changes in laws, policies, service delivery, cultural perceptions, and social norms that over time will improve and enhance women's agency.¹

I. Key Issues

In Asia, increased female political participation has largely been achieved through the use of a “female reservation quota” (reserved seats for women). Countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Timor-Leste have allocated 30% of seats for women in national parliaments, while others like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have a 33% reservation quota for women in local government bodies.

While reserved seats have certainly led to increasing the numbers of women in local governance structures, sheer numbers on their own are insufficient. Going beyond numbers is required to support the quality of women's participation, as well as the gender responsiveness of decision-making processes at all levels.

Reserved seats or affirmative action to ensure women's political representation is an important first step in democratizing and engendering local governance. However, the mere presence of women does not guarantee the quality or effectiveness of their participation, that their voices will be heard in critical decisions, or that concerns of women electorates will automatically be championed. Many women elected to local government on reserved quotas are new to the public sphere of politics, inexperienced with governance institutions, and unfamiliar with procedures and protocols of formal meetings.

¹ World Bank. 2011. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington, DC. p. 152.



Some are elected as representatives of established and politically powerful families, and some are seen as “token” females whose husbands, fathers, and brothers are orchestrating decisions from behind. These instances are well documented.

Mandating the election or appointment of women to political positions is only the first step. Elected women are enthusiastic about serving their electorates and are keen to participate and contribute to decisions on resource allocation and improving the facilities and services in their communities. The challenge is fulfilling their duties, roles, and responsibilities effectively in the face of numerous constraints.

Personal and work-related challenges can influence women’s capacity to carry out their public responsibilities as elected officials. Personal challenges can include low levels of education, lack of support from husbands and families, lack of confidence, and time conflicts with managing both households and public life. Critical work-related challenges include lack of knowledge and understanding about their role as publicly elected officials, navigating the operational procedures, limited facilitation and advocacy skills, lack of information about meeting procedures and protocols, and lack of support from male colleagues. Hence, while female reservation quotas have led to increasing the numbers of women representatives in local government bodies, these women require capacity development, leadership skills, and strategic support to fully exercise their power and truly represent the constituency they serve.

II. Strategies to Ensure Women’s Meaningful Participation in Local Governance

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has utilized different strategies through its lending and technical assistance projects to support locally elected women to build their capacity and facilitate their improved and more effective participation in local governance structures. The following are some examples:

Reserved quotas for women’s representation

In the Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement (Sector) Project in Bangladesh,² the project design introduced strategically identified quotas for three tiers of local governance to facilitate women’s representation in key decision-making committees: town-level coordination committees (30%), ward-level coordination committees (40%), and municipal standing committees (40%). Achieving the targets for women’s representation was set as a precondition for continued access to project financing for participating *pourashavas* (municipalities). The targets were all achieved providing elected women officials the opportunity and platform to voice the needs and priorities of women, and to influence ward- and *pourashava*-level priority-setting exercises. The success of this initiative led to incorporation and codification of the above female targets in the revised 2009 Pourashava Act and Executive Order 2011 covering all municipalities nationwide.

Similarly, the Governance Support Program in Nepal was designed with quotas including 33% female membership in all local governance structures with at least a third of key positions in local governance committees set aside for women. Achieving a critical mass of women in local decision-making bodies was an important step, whether at the ward, village, or municipality level. The first steps were to familiarize women with the workings of the committees, including the terms of reference; provide them with critical information; explain to them the roles and responsibilities of elected officials; and help them navigate meeting agendas, procedures, and protocols. In most areas, the mere presence of women in the committees obligated the male members to take account of women’s views on local-level development funding priorities.³

A key structural problem identified was women’s absence in key executive bodies of local government that make critical funding decisions and control local development budgets. Hence, both the Bangladesh Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement (Sector) Project and the Nepal Governance Support Program supported elected women to branch out from the usual committees related to social welfare and to serve on other key committees such as tender committees, environment subcommittees, and resource allocation committees, and they facilitated women’s contributions to decisions related to timely

² ADB. 2012. *Completion Report: Bangladesh Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement (Sector) Project*. Manila.

³ ADB. Gender Action Plan Implementation Review, Nepal Governance Support Program Cluster (Subprogram 1), Special Review Mission Report. Unpublished.

payment of municipal taxes and utility bills, as well as their involvement in arbitration and other community dispute resolution mechanisms.⁴

Prior to the projects, there were often reports of women representatives not being informed of meeting schedules or availability of local development funds and not being included in critical committees. This hampered their capacity to represent their constituents in an effective manner. The project supported elected women to become more actively engaged in local governance affairs, including in budget allocation, service delivery, and prioritization of local development issues.

Capacity building of elected women

Despite affirmative action and legislative reform to create an enabling environment for women's participation in decision-making bodies, women's relative inexperience in the public sphere of politics, cultural attitudes, social norms, and their unfamiliarity with governance structures place them at an enormous disadvantage.

ADB's Commune Council Development Project in Cambodia provided extensive training to women commune councilors and local women leaders covering a range of topics including their official roles and responsibilities, functions of commune councils, advocacy and networking skills, and planning and organization skills to fulfill their mandated roles. Unlike Bangladesh and Nepal, Cambodia does not have reserved female quotas in commune councils. However, women were appointed to key commune committees.

Familiarity with the council structure and functions enabled women councilors to be more knowledgeable about the business of commune councils and to be more proactive and assertive in commune council activities. As a result, many women were appointed to strategic commune committees, among others the Commune Investment Planning Committee and the Commune Development Planning Committee. In addition, 84% of the participants were able to improve their communication and collaboration with commune chiefs and garner their support in implementing commune development strategies.⁵

Similarly, a regional technical assistance grant project for *Gender and Governance Issues in Local Government*⁶ in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan provided newly elected women representatives with capacity development support in practical skills to increase their effectiveness as local government members. Women representatives were given basic knowledge on local governance mechanisms (roles, budgets, record keeping, agenda, project monitoring, fund management, etc.), as well as skills for conducting meetings, mediating disputes, negotiating development programs, and mobilizing local resources.

The capacity-building initiatives under the project empowered women with a better understanding of local governance structures and enhanced their skills and confidence. In Bangladesh, providing elected women with training on family and land laws, functions of local arbitration courts, and mediation skills for family disputes, led to them becoming involved in mediating 628 dowry, 526 early marriages, 677 polygamy cases, and nearly 2,000 land and 3,254 family disputes. In Pakistan, elected women were critical in arbitrating over 150 disputes concerning domestic violence, child custody, and divorce.⁷

In conservative societies, women representatives were able to apply their newly acquired advocacy skills to garner support from their families in order to fulfill their newly acquired public role. In many cases, these women became role models for other women. While exercising their voice and agency, they, in turn, were also able to promote social justice for those women whose voices are rarely heard.⁸

Connecting women representatives with women constituents

The effectiveness of locally elected women depends largely on how well they are able to represent and address the needs and concerns of their constituents. The Bangladesh Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement (Sector) Project initiated courtyard meetings or "rallies" to link elected women with poor female electorates so they could listen, learn, and understand the priorities of women in the municipalities. This led to municipal initiatives in deliver on some key

⁴ Footnote 2.

⁵ ADB. 2011. Cambodia. *Empowering Women Commune Councilors*. Gender and Development Cooperation Fund Case Studies. <http://www.adb.org/themes/gender/gdcf-case-studies/empowering-female-commune-councilors-cambodia>

⁶ ADB. 2004. *Gender and Governance Issues in Local Government: Regional Report of Technical Assistance in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan*. Manila.

⁷ Footnote 6.

⁸ Footnote 6.

women's concerns such as preventing child marriage; separate female toilets in rail stations and bus terminals; assignment of female patrol police to bus stations; campaigns and resistance against dowry, etc. The courtyard meetings paved the way for poor women to have their voices heard in public spaces. These forums also provided poor women an avenue for dialogue with their elected representative and to access vital information.

In Nepal, women representatives collected information about priorities of local community women through these forums and then negotiated with village development committees for budget allocation accordingly. As a result, elected women were able to mobilize budgets for a variety of projects, including skills training, potable water systems, physical infrastructure, water and sanitation, agriculture and irrigation, health and family planning, education, the environment, and income-generation activities.⁹ The women's forums enabled women representatives to interface with government officials at different levels. They were able to promote issuance of citizenship certificates as well as birth and marriage registration and to mediate disputes.

Networking for solidarity

Even with enhanced skills and knowledge, elected women are often reluctant to exercise their voice and agency due to lack of confidence, limited advocacy skills, and hesitancy to speak in front of a room full of men. Given that men have traditionally dominated politics, newly elected women can encounter intimidation from their male colleagues. Women are often also left out of networking opportunities that provide them with strategic allies.

In Cambodia, the commune councils project established women's forums as a strategy to develop confidence and build solidarity with other women representatives. The networking forums provided a safe space for women councilors to meet regularly, exchange experiences, and brainstorm on strategies for common action beyond their individual party lines. These forums also provided an arena for learning and exercising the art of public speaking, lobbying, advocacy, leadership, and

community mobilization. The outcome of these forums included a demonstrated increase in women councilors' self-confidence, leadership skills, and management capacity. Many were able to positively influence the mind-set of their male colleagues regarding negative perceptions about women's participation in commune councils. Increasingly, they were invited to attend council meetings and the issues they raised were taken into consideration.¹⁰

Similarly, in women's networks established under the regional technical assistance project, women representatives were also linked up with government line agencies, nongovernment organizations, and the private sector. The objective of such networking events was to encourage women representatives to build and sustain networks with a wide range of stakeholders and to create an opportunity to exercise their role and responsibility to facilitate their constituents' access to services and employment opportunities. These forums helped them serve as bridges linking development resources to the needs and concerns identified by women in the community.

III. Lessons Learned

While reserved seats and quotas have led to increasing women's representation in local governance structures, they are not sufficient on their own to help elected women carry out their roles and mandate. Complementary capacity development is required to equip women leaders with the knowledge, tools, and skills to carry out their functions more effectively.

Elected women officials can only be effective if they are in tune with issues that concern their constituents. Open forums that allow dialogue with women in the community on their needs and priorities will enable locally elected women to hear the voices of those who are often not heard. These forums can also serve as critical platforms for elected women to network among themselves. Such public forums can also serve as a powerful tool for women to speak with one voice.

⁹ Footnote 6.

¹⁰ Footnote 5.