

Decentralization, Women's Rights and Poverty: Learning from India and South Africa¹

Jo Beall

Introduction

From the early 1980s decentralisation became integral to international development and by the mid-1990s 80 per cent of countries were engaged in some form of decentralisation (Crook and Manor 2000). Much of the enthusiasm for devolved governance and for enhancing the powers and responsibilities of local units of government is based on the idea that they are closer to the people that the state is supposed to serve. It is also often assumed that the global trend towards the decentralization of public roles, responsibilities and resources is also good for women, as a vehicle for increasing women's participation in local government and because women are concerned with things homebound and local, such as basic infrastructure and services. Yet in reality localisation has its limits and even when the benefits of decentralisation can be demonstrated it is not guaranteed that these are extended to *all* women.

Localisation is associated with notions of democratic decentralisation and rights-based approaches (RBAs) to development. RBAs attempt to integrate the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into development and constitute an advance on a strictly legal approach to rights by including a focus on the socio-economic and political rights of poor and marginal social groups. This is especially important for poor women who have little access to lawyers and courts and who depend on the meeting of socio-economic rights for exercising their gendered responsibilities. The value of RBAs is that they have extended the analysis of women in development analysis from a

¹ Published in Sylvia Chant (editor) *Elgar International Handbook on Gender and Poverty*, Edward Elgar (2010)

primary concern with women's legal and to a degree, political rights, to a focus on socio-economic or 'third generation rights'.

Despite the prevalence of the discourse of decentralisation and RBAs in development, they have come under significant criticism in terms of their impact on women and especially poor women. Nevertheless, they have continued salience and influence on development policy agendas in critical ways and so we need to understand why they hold such appeal and if they benefit poor women. The chapter explores these issues in the context of India and South Africa, chosen because they have both gone further than many other countries in attempting to implement democratic decentralisation and gender equity in local governance. While their experience points to many positive processes and outcomes it is also the case that decentralisation and local politics have impacted on women in paradoxical ways, particularly with regard to advancing the rights of poor women.

Democratic Decentralisation and Women's Rights

Decentralisation takes various forms. At one end of the spectrum is the geographical dispersement of government without transfer of authority from the centre, known as deconcentration. At the other end strong decentralisation involves the delegation or devolution of responsibility to semi-independent authorities or lower tiers of government. From the 1980s in relation to development policy decentralisation was often used to put in place privatisation and deregulation of the provision of public services (Manor, 1999; Rondinelli et al, 1989). In the 1990s it was associated with reversing this 'over-withdrawal of the state' back in by breaking government into smaller units that could enter into multi-sector partnerships with the private and social sectors. It became an article of faith that decentralised states engaged in public-private partnerships

would become more efficient and lead to effective delivery (World Bank 1997: 98).

A broader consensus developed around the view that decentralisation had an explicitly democratising function, which spanned a wide ideological terrain. While the World Bank articulated a liberal discourse on decentralisation the left saw the vitalisation of democracy as being predicated on popular participation in local public spheres. Critics of notions of democratic decentralisation point out that there are no *a priori* reasons why more localized forms of governance are more accountable and that localism can also serve powerful and global interests by distracting attention from supra-local issues and processes (Harris et al, 2005).

Studies of gendered citizenship and women's relationship with the state have considered how these relate to physical and social reproduction, power dynamics within households and communities and the complicity of the state in the construction of gendered and other identities and add to this scepticism (Kabeer, 2005; Rai, 1996; Waylen, 1998). Less attention has been paid to local level citizenship but the development literature at least, tends to support the idea that women are more politically active and influential at the local level (Evertzen, 2001). It is also argued that women's interests are linked to their gendered responsibilities in households and communities, which often relate to the provision of local infrastructure and services that in turn become policy priorities for women (IULA 1998). Yet evidence from India and South Africa suggests that the purported ease of entry into local political processes for women is exaggerated and once in office they face tremendous difficulties. Furthermore, greater efficiency in service delivery at the local level does not necessarily guarantee sensitivity to women's gendered interests and socio-economic rights.

Localisation and Women's Rights in India and South Africa

India and South Africa are chosen as a focus for this exploration in that they have done better than most in advancing poor women's rights in local government. The Indian Constitution provides for local government institutions in rural and urban areas of India and following a recommendation in 1988 on reservations for women by the National Perspective Plan for Women, the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution were enacted in 1992. They reserved one third of seats for women in the three-tier *Panchayati Raj* system (local councils in rural areas) and urban ward councils respectively, constituting a bold step towards increasing women's political participation and empowerment. South Africa's experience is more recent but following the poor showing of women in the first democratic local government elections in 1995, campaigns were launched to increase the representation of women. This led to a rise from 19 per cent women local councillors to 28 per cent in the 2000 local government elections.

Despite their relative success in including women in local government when compared to many other contexts in low and middle income countries, local governance in India and South Africa holds disappointments in respect of women. Political power and social authority is often more deeply embedded at the local level. One of the reasons why local governance is a disappointing arena for women is that it is often responsive to informal networks of power and influence, which undermine or bypass formal rules and procedures. Women often do not have access to the informal networks that often sustain and reproduce the institutions and social practices that make up local governance, institutions and practices that in any case are hostile to or exclusionary of women.

In India, for example, despite a 33 per cent reservation for women in India, the seats reserved for them rotate in every election. Hence after a ward has been reserved for all female competition in one election, it becomes a general ward in

the next, in which both women and men can compete: 'As a result political parties simply do not take women's candidacy seriously nor do they invest in the elected woman candidate knowing very well that in the next round of elections these women are of no use to their electoral prospects' (Mukhopadhyay 2005:14). Customary *panchayats* have played a vital gate-keeping role in relation to local elections in India, controlling nominations and the selection of women and actively discouraging certain women from contesting or re-contesting elections, reducing their chances of continuity (Ananth Pur 2004).

In South Africa 'traditional' authorities and customary institutions exercise a strong influential on local governance. Based on male hereditary principles chieftaincy is antithetical to a local democracy that is inclusive of women and respectful of their rights (Beall, 2005). Customary law discriminates against women who cannot own land or property in their own right and who lose any access rights on the death of their husbands unless arbitrated otherwise by the chief, a principle of primogeniture upheld by the Supreme Court as recently as 2000 even though under the South African Constitution principles of gender equity are supposed to prevail over the exercise of customary law (Hassim 2005). While local government might be the sphere of governance closest to women's life concerns, it is also the tier of governance most proximate to peoples' prejudices and networks of power and influence that are exclusive of women and sometimes abusive of them. Indeed the backlash against women who raise their heads above the political parapet has sometimes been extreme, ranging from censure to ostracism and witchcraft accusations for stepping outside conventional gender roles (Mbatha, 2003).

In India, some state governments have been slow to implement the necessary provisions to enable governance of local *panchayats* to operate effectively, for example by not transferring the necessary revenue, leaving local politics in the control of village and urban elites (Pal 2004). The media has focused on so-called 'proxy women' who are in decision making positions as the relatives of

influential men, only called upon for their presence or signatures rather than exercising real influence on behalf of women (Everett 2008; Kudva, 2003). However, there are some really positive outcomes from the Indian experience as well. It has been demonstrated that women are more likely than men to raise issues related to basic services such as drinking water and where women are *panchayati* chairs more investment for basic services is likely to be forthcoming (Chattopadhyay and Duplo 2004).

In South Africa decentralisation and neoliberal policies have gone hand in hand, including the requirement that all but the poorest local authorities raise a large proportion of their own revenue. The demand for cost recovery has given rise to growing user charges for local services with a devastating impact on low income households and communities, in which women bear the burden of cost recovery and the consequences of failure to pay. This can take the form of service cut-offs which prevent women undertaking their domestic roles; escalating household debts or reducing consumption in order to meet utility bills, both often the responsibility of women (Beall, 1998, 2005). Social movements that mobilise poor people around these issues, such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum in South Africa, tend to include women among their rank and file but do not always take up their gendered interests in campaigns (Hassim, 2006).

In both countries there are limits to women's local political effectiveness but also considerable evidence, especially from India, of women successfully engaging in local governance and of women leaders articulating priorities in local planning and impacting upon decision-making and spending patterns (Marayam, 2003; Vijayalaxmi, 2002). In both countries, scholarship shows that presence matters. As women spend longer in local politics they gain greater confidence and face declining resistance from men and when their numbers in local councils reach a critical mass they gain more influence (Sharma, 2004; Singh, 2005; van Donk, 2002).

Conclusion

In both India and South Africa women have not always been able to take effective advantage of the opportunities offered by decentralised governance and policies focusing on rights and gender equity. On the contrary they have sometimes been impacted negatively by decentralisation and localisation, especially when accompanied by neoliberal policies such as cost recovery. Yet for all their deficiencies at the present time 'the focus on democratic decentralisation and rights currently provides 'the only effective means to challenge inequality and to advance programmes that would promote greater social justice and more equitable development' (Molyneux and Razavi 2002:4). However, if local democracy is to be engendered and women's political and socio-economic rights advanced at the local level, then some of the sub-texts and dangers of decentralisation processes and how these might be overcome must be examined and addressed.

To be blindly critical of democratic decentralisation and RBAs is to miss the opportunities they offer for widening the room for manoeuvre at the local level in terms of enhanced participation of women in local politics and increased accountability for effective and gender sensitive service delivery. There is a compelling argument for supporting women's participation in an embedded local politics that coordinates with state policy at all levels. Nevertheless, the way in which social, economic and political forces intermesh at the local level makes this a particularly difficult arena for women's political engagement, rather than a site of easy entrance into public life as is so often assumed.

If local democracy is to be engendered and women's political and socio-economic rights advanced at the local level, then some of the sub-texts and dangers of decentralisation processes and how these might undermine RBA

agendas must be acknowledged, especially in the context of a dominant neo-liberal development agenda. Put another way, it is important that the pursuit of decentralisation and women's rights does not become a vehicle for putting a human face on neo-liberal preoccupations with privatisation, deregulation and cost recovery and the expense of poor women. For decentralisation and women's rights to be positively correlated they both need to be part of wider democratic processes in which women are represented politically at all levels of governance. Rather women's political gains through participation in local governance need to permeate upwards and articulate with national level politics and policy.

The experience of India and South Africa suggest that there are two key prerequisites for decentralisation to be positively associated with women's rights. First, women need to be organised and represented locally otherwise decentralisation remains nothing more than an administrative exercise, and one that invariably ignores the interests and priorities of poor women. Second, decentralisation is best pursued in the context of a strong state that is willing and able to engage with organised women across all spheres and tiers of government and not simply at the local level.

The experiences of democratic decentralisation in India and South Africa show many positive results both in terms of process and outcome. However, advancing the rights and especially the socio-economic rights of poor women cannot be left to the local level alone, especially where local government is resource constrained. By the same token, holding right-bearers to account at supra-local levels is often difficult for poor women, whose interests need to be represented first in locally embedded democratic institutions that are connected into national accountability mechanisms. With these dimensions in place, rights-based approaches can serve to cancel out some of the limitations of decentralisation, while a focus on decentralisation can help advance the rights agenda to a greater concern with socio-economic rights.

Bibliography:

Ananth Pur, K. (2004) *Rivalry or Synergy? Formal and Informal Local Governance in Rural India*, IDS Working Paper No. 226, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Beall, J. (2005) 'Decentralizing Government and De-centering Gender: Lessons from Local Government Reform in South Africa', *Politics and Society* 33(2) June, pp. 253-276.

Beall, Jo (1998) 'Trickle Down or Rising Tide? Lessons on Mainstreaming Gender Policy from Colombia and South Africa', *Social Policy and Administration*, Vol. 32, No. 5, December, pp 513-534.

Chattapadhyay, R. and E. Duflo (2004) 'Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a
Randomized Policy Experiment in India', *Econometrica*, Vol. 75, No. 5, pp. 1409-1442.

Crook, R. and J. Manor (2000) *Democratic Decentralization, Operations Evaluation*
Department Working Paper, Washington D.C: World Bank.

Everett, J. (2008) 'Women in Local Government in India' in A.M. Goetz (ed.) *Governing Women, Women's Political Effectiveness in Contexts of Democratization and Governance Reform*, New York and London: Routledge.

Evertzen, A. (2001) *Gender and Local Governance*. SNV – Netherlands Development Organization, Amsterdam.
http://www.kit.nl/gcg/assets/images/Gender_and_Local_Governance.doc.

Harriss, J., K. Stokke and O. Törnquist (eds) (2005) *Politicising Democracy: Local Politics and Democratisation in Developing Countries*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hassim, S. (2006) *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa, Contesting Authority*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Hassim, S. (2005) 'A virtuous circle? Gender equality and representation in South Africa', in J. Daniel, R. Southall and J. Lutchman (eds) *State of the Nation South Africa 2004-2005*, Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press.

IULA. 1998. *Policy Paper on Women in Local Government*. International Union of Local Authorities, New York.

- Kabeer, N. (ed.) (2005) *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, London: Zed Books.
- Kudva, N. (2003) 'Engineering Elections: The Experiences of Women in *Panchayati Raj* in Karnataka, India', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 445-463.
- Manor, J. (1999) *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization*, Washington D.C.: The World Bank.
- Mayaram, S. (2003) 'Gender in Governance: Family and the Constitutional Panchayats of Contemporary India' in M. Pernau, A. Imtiaz and H. Reifeld (eds) *Family and Gender*, New Delhi: Sage, pp. 242-276.
- Mbatha, L. (2003) 'Democratising local government: Problems and opportunities in the advancement of gender equality in South Africa' in A. M. Goetz and S. Hassim (eds.) *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*, London: Zed Books, pp. 188-212.
- Molyneux M. and S. Razavi (2002) 'Introduction' in M. Molyneux and S. Razavi (eds) *Gender Justice, Development and Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-42.
- Mukhopadhyay, M. (2005) 'Decentralisation and Gender Equity in South Asia: An Issues Paper', prepared for the Women's Rights and Citizenship Programme of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).
- Pal, M. (2004) '*Panchayati Raj* and Rural Governance: Experiences of a Decade', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10th January, pp. 137-143, <http://www.epw.org.in>
- Rai, S. (1996) 'Women and the State in the Third World: Some Issues for Debate' in S. Rai and G. Lievesley (eds) *Women and the State, International Perspectives*, London: Taylor and Francis, pp. 5-22.
- Rondinelli, D., J. McCullough and R.W. Johnson (1989) 'Analysing Decentralization policies in developing countries: A political-economy framework' *Development and Change*, 20(1), pp. 57-87.
- Sharma, K. (2004) 'From Representation to Presence: The Paradox of Power and Powerlessness', in D. Bandyopadhyay and Amitava Mukherjee (eds) *New Issues in Panchayati Raj*, Delhi: Concept Publishing.
- Singh, J. (ed.) (2005) *Women and Panchayati Raj*, Delhi: Sunrise.

Van Donk, M. (2002) 'Local government's role in realising gender equality: From policy to practice' in S. Parnell, E. Pieterse, M. Swilling and D. Wooldridge (eds) *Democratising Local Government: The South African Experiment*, Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

Vijayalakshmi, V. (2002) *Gender, Accountability and Political Representation in Local Government*, Working Paper No. 102, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

Waylen, G. (1998) 'Gender, Feminism and the State' in V. Randall and G. Waylen (eds) *Gender, Politics and the State*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1-17.

World Bank (1997) *World Development Report: The State in a Changing World*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.