

## WOMEN DECISION-MAKING: A CROSS-CULTURAL LINKAGE, LEARNING AND CELEBRATION

**For International Women's Week, 2004**

**Hosted by:**

South Asia Partnership (SAP) Canada,  
the City of Ottawa and the  
Federation of Canadian Municipalities  
(FCM)  
Report by Victoria Walker

March 5, 2004  
Ottawa City Hall

### **BACKGROUND AND KEY THEMES**

The seminar on “Women Decision-Making: A Cross-Cultural Linkage, Learning and Celebration” provided an opportunity to discuss and explore some of the innovations, successes and barriers for women involved in local governance in both India and Canada. Planned to coincide with International Women's Week, a broad range of people from both civil society and government participated in the event. Ottawa City Councilor Diane Holmes opened the discussion by welcoming all who attended, encouraging the exchange of ideas between different countries and communities, and urging more women to become politically active in local government.

The keynote address was on lessons from India where 33 per cent of seats in local government have been reserved for women since 1992-93. It was followed by presentations on the City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) on providing gender-sensitive services in Ottawa, and a Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) project on increasing women's participation in municipal consultations. The Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre and the Somali Women's Support and Information Line also presented under the CAWI project umbrella. A wide-ranging discussion followed these presentations.

Key themes from the presentations included the commonality of experiences of different constituencies in encouraging women to interact with local government, the difficulty that some women (visible minority, new immigrant, lesbian, poor, elderly, differently abled, etc) experience in accessing local government services and how their problems may be addressed; the value of good outreach and communications in enabling women's participation; and the need for government institutions to reflect the diversity of the communities that they seek to represent.

## **KEYNOTE PRESENTATION: A QUOTA SYSTEM FOR WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT – LESSONS FROM INDIA**

**Ms Veena Gokhale, Program Manager (India), SAP Canada**

### Background

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992-93) in India provide an extraordinary case study on women in local government as the Acts reserved 33 per cent of seats for women in the three tiers of government. While it has taken some time to implement, the net result of this ground breaking legislation has been that an estimated one million women are currently in local government in India, and over five million women have had some experience of local politics in the last ten years. SAP Canada has supported a three-year project in five South Asian countries, including India, to encourage women's empowerment through participation in local governance. Ms Gokhale said that her presentation was based on the research of a colleague, Dr Bidyut Mohanty, from a partner organization in India – the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS), as well as on a Canadian funded workshop that SAP Canada and ISS held in New Delhi, in October 2003, on the impact of the amendments on women's empowerment in India.

### Development indices and context

The implications of these Constitutional Amendments need to be understood in the context of India's political and social environment. India has been a parliamentary democracy since independence in 1947. While increasingly governed by coalitions at the Centre, these coalitions have proven relatively stable. Despite high illiteracy in India, the electorate is politically savvy. India's judiciary is independent and the country has strong civil society institutions and a growing non-profit sector.

It is difficult to generalise about India because of its size and diversity but the following comments are some general observations about India's development and the status of women. India's poverty, measured for the purpose of this talk, in indicators such as health and education, remains a major challenge. There is a significant development divide between the Northern and Southern states of India. Insurgencies and people's 'struggles' continue in many parts of the country. While there is growing interest in India as an emerging economic giant, the prosperity is not being shared leading many non-government organizations (NGOs) to ask where is the 'trickle down'. Despite progress in education, India remains home to the world's largest number of illiterate people, the majority of whom are women. Maternal mortality remains high, particularly in rural areas. India's male/female sex ratio, with a larger number of men than women, shows the continuation of a deeply patriarchal society. Girl children are being aborted through the misuse of amniocentesis and infanticide is practiced in some parts of the country. Despite the presence of a strong women's movement in India, and evidence of progressive social change, the status of women remains generally low.

### The 73rd and 74th Amendments – devolution and democracy

Local government in India has a three-tier structure. At the lowest level is the panchayat, a centuries old, village level, self-governing institution, that progressively lost power with the establishment of British rule in India. In 1992-93, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments started a process of devolution and grassroots democracy by revitalising the role panchayats

have in government. Panchayats were given constitutional recognition and responsibility (although not necessarily the funding) for a range of issues including resource management, family planning, education and health. The most striking feature of these amendments was that they allocated 33 per cent of seats in the rural and urban local government to women. Other disadvantaged, low-caste groups were also granted a percentage of seats. This quota is for both sexes. Thus women, and women from marginalized communities, and not just privileged women, gained a voice in these institutions, for the first time.

Another innovative change was that the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment gave recognition to a body called the *gram sabha*, which is akin to a village assembly. This body has to have input in panchayat decision-making. While not perfect in practice, the gram sabha is open to anyone on the village electoral roll and provides a mechanism for the wider community to have a voice in panchayat decisions.

### Impact of the amendments on women's status

Women's participation in local government can best be understood within the context of a 'continuum of empowerment'. For some, including women in *purdah* (veil) and low caste women, just attending the panchayat meetings -is a big step forward. Others, including very marginalized women, have taken their participation much further to become women's' activists. These women are powerful role models for others. The sheer numbers that have been elected (one million each term) provide visibility and participation for women in government.

It is often easier for women in the community to approach women representatives (instead of men) and their presence has made it easier in subsequent elections for other women to participate. For the women representatives themselves, many have noted that their participation has changed relations within their family for the better, as well as heightened their perceptions of their own capabilities.

Issues addressed by women representatives within the panchayat are varied and include local issues such as health, education, housing, sanitation, water and roads. Some elected women have reported that they were able to help women deal with family problems including spousal abuse as their position allowed them to play a role in conflict resolution. Others were able to make an outstanding contribution in specific areas such as campaigning for the education of girls and protesting against the custom of *purdah*.

### Critiques

There are various critiques about the process of empowering women in India through participation in local governance. Some critics have claimed that these women representatives are merely 'proxy women' who are in practice controlled and manipulated by men in the family and have no real voice of their own. These critiques however are too simplistic. In particular, they do not sufficiently allow for the fact that politics itself is a very gendered space and construct. The critiques analyse women in terms of their 'deficiencies' rather than allowing for the fact that women may have different ways than men, of getting their work done. The relationship of male family members with the elected women can be controlling, but is also at times collaborative and consensual. It must also be remembered that men in politics rarely act autonomously. It has been observed that women tend to gain autonomy as they gain political

experience. More generally, women have to work with and through a bureaucracy that is overwhelmingly male, sometimes corrupt, and often disdainful of women representatives. This can be a barrier to effective participation.

### Enabling Factors and Innovations

Women continue to face many constraints to their participation in local government. These constraints include lack of experience, illiteracy, family responsibilities, restrictive social norms, lack of an enabling environment, violence, including family violence triggered by their new position, harassment and character assassination. A few women have even lost their lives as a consequence of becoming active in local politics.

Despite these constraints, recent research shows that family members, including husbands, and especially female family members, are often supportive of these women representatives. (It needs to be noted that many rural Indian women live in extended families.) Prohibitions around women's participation in public life are slowly diminishing and this change is expected to accelerate over time. Some of these women have stood for re-election, including from unreserved seats, and won. Some now aspire to higher levels of political office as their confidence and understanding of government increases.

Some enabling factors for women elected representatives includes the work of civil society groups, who are providing training and support, as well as the extensive existence of women's self-help groups. India's thriving NGO sector allows various synergies to develop that enables progressive social change. Research shows that where social or environmental movements interact with women elected representatives, the women do much better. This finding does not diminish the fact that women continue to face major constraints in participating in local government. Rather, it further emphasizes that these constraints are easier to address within a supportive, enabling environment, including the active involvement of NGOs and social movements.

### **CITY FOR ALL WOMEN INITIATIVE (CAWI)**

**Ms Suzanne Doerge (CAWI) Ms. Maryan Abdirahman (Somali Women's Support and Information Line) and Ms. Sandy Onyalo (Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre)**

### Project Background

The City for All Women Initiative came out of an earlier project that examined women's access to City of Ottawa services and made recommendations on improving access. One of the findings from this study was that there was an issue not only about women's access to resources, but also who made decisions about service provision, the type of services provided and the gender impact of these services. This is particularly relevant as many city services have a profound impact on women because they are frequent users of municipal public services. Further questions arose about whether the City had the statistics necessary to assess the impact of its policies on women and men; if gender issues were being taken into account in policy making; and the extent to which women are really on the agenda when fiscal decisions are being made.

The project is in its initial phase and has commenced with a survey of current practices. Project staff is also in discussion with municipal politicians and other jurisdictions about creative ideas for making Ottawa more women-friendly, and particularly to the needs of diverse women. Using this information, the project will then look at pulling together a strategy for gender-sensitive service practices that may work in Ottawa. While data is still being collected for analysis, it is clear even from this early stage in the project that not all women have the same experience in accessing municipal services. Women who are white, middle-class and educated have easier access to resources than women who do not fit this profile. Particularly for women who do not speak English, access is more difficult.

### Experience of the Somali Women's Support and Information Line

The Somali community in Ottawa comprises of a large number of women who have little previous exposure to politics. They represent different "tribal groups." Some arrived as single mothers while many came with their husband, but the husband returned. Most came to Canada between 1989-1997 and brought with them some significant problems. A number of educated women in the community opened a help-line in 1996 to provide counseling and crisis intervention and to link isolated women with appropriate services. Once it opened, the help-line received a variety of calls requiring a broad range of solutions. In the process of dealing with these enquiries, those working on the help-line became overwhelmed with the needs in the community and the stress of the integration process.

For many of the women who called into the help-line, the idea of being accepted/integrated into Canada was unimaginable. Language was a major barrier. Moreover, the burden of managing a home in a new culture left these women little time to go out and learn, or do anything else beyond mere survival. The few men that immigrated to Canada were frustrated by the lack of employment and changes to their traditional family structure. In this context, the Somali help-line has provided invaluable service. It also expanded to include a health-line that is recorded in Somali and has covered issues such as smoking, breast cancer, SARS, immunisation and the West Nile virus. While it has received some grant money, the Somali help-line remains a volunteer service without City of Ottawa funding, and could close at any time.

Many women in the Somali community do not understand the democratic process, as it did not form the basis of Somali society. Moreover, Somali women do not see other Somalis working in local government and they do not see their community reflected in Canadian institutions. Some complain about the lack of cultural sensitivity of some city workers. Many in the community face financial hardship. They are in a difficult position as they need to work to make money, but they also need English language training, to further their education.

Women in the Somali community, as well as other immigrant women, need opportunities in order to prosper. These opportunities must include education about Canada's political processes. Somalis come from a community that has oral traditions. Holding focus groups and workshops to increase understanding of local governance would work well with this community. An additional help-line in Somali on questions of political process and procedures would also help. This type of education would also help Somali women to improve their education, their employment opportunities, and allow them a more active role in educating their children. The City should realize that investing in immigrant families enables a successful future generation.

## Experience of the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre

The largest barrier for grassroots organisations linking into municipal government is that of communication. For marginal groups, or newcomers, or isolated individuals, it is a big step to telephone a city counselor. Often it is not clear whom to contact within the City to get specific information.

It would be useful for the City of Ottawa to put some more work into how it can build relationships with local groups. An important part of this process could be City of Ottawa staff visiting these groups or attending local events. At present, attendance at community events is inconsistent.

Representation is also an issue for grass roots organisations. Ottawa is growing rapidly and its composition is changing. It is important that the City works to ensure that these changes are reflected in City Hall. If the community “sees itself” in City Hall, it will be more confident that its pressing issues will be pursued. Organisations and communities have been coming together to oppose proposed massive cuts to services. These groups should learn from this process and come together outside of the current budgetary process to become more proactive and participative citizens.

An issue of particular concern to the Rape Crisis Centre is the recent trend to ‘degender’ women’s services and services to address sexual violence. Demand for its services is growing every year while funds are shrinking. This is a disturbing trend in many ways. The reality of sexual violence is that most perpetrators are men and most victims are women. To remove the gender element from this service sends a message that decision-makers do not recognise the value and content of these services.

In terms of the current budgetary discussions, the Rape Crisis Centre is facing cuts that will have a long-term impact on the services it can provide. Other organisations however, such as WISE, which provides community-based safety audits, are likely to be cut completely. (In the end, WISE was not cut) It is hard to understand the rationale behind such decisions when promotion of safety within communities is so important in addressing sexual violence. Greater communication and direct contact between City staff and community organisations may help promote greater understanding and awareness.

### **INCREASING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN MUNICIPAL CONSULTATION PROCESSES PROJECT**

**Dr Caroline Andrew, Member Steering Committee  
Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM)**

The “Increasing Women’s Participation in Municipal Consultations Processes Project” is a Canada-wide initiative supported by Status of Women Canada. It is a one-year project aimed at increasing women’s participation in the municipal consultation processes so that women can have a meaningful input into activities that affect their lives. It is tied in with the CAWI project discussed in this seminar. The CAWI project has, within its mandate, learning from experiences in other parts of the world. It could, for example, learn from India. FCM works on gender

equality projects in other countries and it is keen to develop a connection between its international work and what is happening on a national level.

The project has a national reach with research work being undertaken at regional centres across the country. This Canada-wide research has a number of parts including a survey of member municipalities and interviews with national women's groups. Project staff work closely with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' women's committee. Once the research is complete, the project should produce a 'tool kit' which will help people work better with municipal government.

Results from the project survey are now in and analysis of the data has begun. There are already a few preliminary findings of interest. While 27 per cent of elected officials at the municipal level are women, only 1 per cent of these are women from a visible minority. This speaks to the lack of representation of women who are doubly disadvantaged. Other early results concern barriers to women's participation in municipal consultations, including a lack of practical support for women, insufficient information about why women should become involved, and lack of outreach. None of the municipalities surveyed reported collecting gender-disaggregated statistics although there was some recognition that gender assessment was important when dealing with certain issues. These preliminary results suggest that there is considerable work to be done to provide better tools for people to interact with municipalities.

Further information on the project can be obtained from the FCM website on [www.fcm.ca](http://www.fcm.ca)

## QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND COMMENTS

- **Violence Against Women:** Different elements of the community focused on how violence against women does not seem to be treated in an even-handed and holistic way. It is important to recognise diversity within all communities, including those affected by violence.
- **Services for multicultural community:** There seems to be some contradiction between Canada's stated policy of multiculturalism and the practice adopted by the municipality. Many municipal services are not sensitive to cultural diversity. A number of women are working in isolation within their ethnic communities. Families are under stress as former extended families break down and children must cope with going to school in a new country and environment. Seniors from minority groups in nursing homes are a case in point. Communities should be allowed to care for their seniors in nursing homes in a way that is culturally sensitive.
- Women from the Chinese community face particularly challenging linguistic and cultural barriers as they strive to adapt to life in Canada; they need attention and resources.
- Some communities, including many women from Latin America, have considerable depth of experience working with community groups in a politically charged environment. These skills should be better recognized and exploited.
- **Focusing on the most marginalised:** It is clear that our ethnic communities are particularly vulnerable – many of the homeless people in Ottawa, for example, were not born in Canada - and it is important that social services focus on the most marginalised in society.
- **Role of public libraries:** Libraries can have a valuable role in the lives of newcomers to Canada and are an important part of city infrastructure. They are free, accessible and can provide effective ESL services. They can also be at the cutting edge of social change and can be important tools in community development. The library system is however under financial stress and needs support.
- **Interacting with City staff:** The City of Ottawa is made up of many people with a diversity of opinions and approaches. Some are sympathetic to the women's agenda, including the collection of gender-disaggregated information, while others do not see the relevance of this information. It is important for City staff, and grassroots organisations with an interest in gender issues, to link up and help each other to put these issues on the agenda. Unless decision-makers can be encouraged to take on these issues, it will be difficult to make much progress.
- **Role of Committees:** The City has a range of committees, such as those on equity and diversity, to represent the views and concerns of community groups. Committee members are willing to bring the issues of grassroots organisations to the table and the latter should communicate with the former. It was noted that many of these committees operate from a mainstream and patriarchal perspective, despite the increasingly diverse nature of committee



members. Further thought is needed on how to change the framework in which municipal government works.

- **Interacting with the community:** A number of participants mentioned the importance of the visibility of City Councillors and staff in the work of community groups as it aids communication and ensures a better understanding of the work of community groups. It is also important to take a holistic approach to community support. Women and children must be a priority. Safety and security is vital in ensuring the healthy development of communities.
- **Gender budgeting:** Status of Women Canada has put together some very good work on gender mainstreaming, including information on gender budgeting on its website. [http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/resources/gba-research\\_e.html#budget](http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/resources/gba-research_e.html#budget)
- The Indian state of Kerala has done groundbreaking work on participative planning, and it has applied a gender lens to this process as well. The first step in this was sensitizing the community on gender issues. Ten per cent of the local government budgets in Kerala are allocated for women, and there is also a monitoring process to evaluate this, in place. There is considerable information on the Kerala 'People's Plan Campaign' available on the web
- UNIFEM has also developed a site on gender budgeting <http://www.gender-budgets.org/>

## KEY OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ‘Empowerment’ of women, including through participation in local government, is a concept that should be celebrated. It is not however a ‘one size fits all’ idea but part of a continuum. Moreover, critiques of empowerment models should take into account that politics itself is a highly gendered space and construct.
- NGOs and other civil society groups can have an important role in creating the type of enabling environment necessary for women in local government to operate more effectively.
- Not all women have the same experience in accessing local government resources in Ottawa. Women who do not fit the ‘mainstream profile’ - particularly women who do not speak English – have more difficulty accessing these resources. It is important for the City to develop and use appropriate communication strategies to reach them.
- Conversely, access can be enhanced by detailed knowledge of the community. For example, the Somali community responds well to help-line messages in part because of the strong oral traditions of Somalia.
- It is important for local government institutions to reflect the diversity of the communities it seeks to represent.
- Education is an important enabling factor in the successful integration of new immigrants. This includes not only providing language training, but also education about the wider society, including political processes in Canada. New communities need to know why they should be involved in local government and how it operates. This is also an important element of investing in the future generation.
- Some communities may be wary about political involvement, but education may help break that barrier. On the other hand, some ethnic minority communities, including some from Latin America, have particular skills working in a highly politicised environment, which could be of considerable value locally. Action needs to be taken to recognize and use these skills.
- Effective communication is important in linking community organisations with municipal government as it helps to develop greater understanding and better-informed decision-making. Community events provide a good platform for community members and local government representatives to meet.
- Community groups should network and cooperate better in pursuing pressing issues. They should not wait for a funding crisis, or an emergency, to start networking.
- More effort is needed to make the case to decision-makers on why gender disaggregated information is useful and important. This could be the first step towards government being influenced to change its data collection practice.
- Better ‘tools’ to help people interact with municipalities would be useful; a “municipal services map” for e.g. that will tell people where to go for specific information.
- More effort is needed on how to translate multicultural policy into practice at the level of municipal service delivery.
- Libraries have important and diverse role to play in community development, and in meeting community needs.