

**A DECADE OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
THROUGH
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN INDIA**
(October 20 –21, 2003, New Delhi)

*Women and Governance: Reimagining the State: Micro Study on
Obstacles and Factors Mediating Women's Political
Participation*

Rekha Bezboruah



Institute of Social Sciences



South Asia Partnership Canada

IDRC  CRDI

International Development Research Centre

This paper is based on the experience of a research study conducted in North India over the period 1998–1999. The states covered were Punjab, UP, Himachal and the NCT of Delhi. It also includes the findings and insights from a series of follow-up workshops meant to take back the findings to the respondents. The framework of the study was provided by a larger research project with the same title, “Women and Governance: Reimagining the State”, covering five countries of South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India). Ekatra’s study forms one chapter in the study.

The project, initiated and coordinated by ICES, Sri Lanka, was in a sense a response to the gender bias evident in the documentation of South Asia’s political histories which “reflect a male political culture and decision-making.” An interesting counterpoint was that out of the five participating countries, four have had women heads of state at some point in their recent past, or currently as is the case in Bangladesh. Despite this fact, women’s voices are largely missing from political discourse, and their experience of governance, visions of a state that would empower them, and recommendations for political change are rarely articulated.

To quote from the ICES report: “the chequered history of the consequences of women’s mobilization in political movements in South Asia and their contribution to national political destinies at levels other than heads of state (also) exemplifies contradictory forces and issues. Women of different class, caste, religious and ethnic backgrounds have played important roles in the independence movements and past struggles for democracy, while more recent anti-systemic impulses in south Asia have recruited women cadres in other than care taking positions(as in Sri Lanka).” Yet in post-independence/revolution contexts, women’s political ambitions were thwarted, under pressures to return to the domestic sphere and abandon public spaces.

In India, viewed in the context of women’s contribution to the national independence movement and their significant support in sustaining post-independence, anti-systemic struggles, this gender bias challenges rational analysis. Today, political participation is a key issue in the discourse on human rights and equitable, sustainable development.

Ekatra’s study attempts to understand the nature of political culture in North India, specifically the mediating factors and obstacles to women’s political participation. How women understand governance, politics, government and the State, are subjects of this enquiry, in an effort to understand women’s vision of a just and gender-sensitive State. The broad variables of caste and diversity were agreed upon as providing the most appropriate framework for North and South India. The study explores caste, class, religion, ethnicity and socio-cultural diversities that are the significant mediating factors in regional and national political processes and to women’s political participation. Formal and non-formal politics, the women’s movement and other kinds of political mobilization have been included in the definition of politics. Within the formal system, membership of political parties, State and central legislative bodies have been covered.

Chapters include a historical perspective on women’s role in the independence struggle, the experience of local self-government, interface with the State and negotiation of citizenship, mediation by political parties, NGOs and civil society organizations, and women’s vision of the State. Since this workshop is focused on the impact of the reservation policy at the grassroots, this paper restricts itself to the findings on local governance issues.

As part of an extended methodology, Ekatra shared the study with the respondents and newly elected members of the panchayats in a series of post-study workshops. The findings also draw upon the fresh insights obtained from these workshops into the problems faced by the elected women representatives (EWRs), which compromise effective governance.

The sample of the study included 1,166 respondents, of which 363 were elected members and the rest were general voters. In addition, special interviews were conducted with 307 women from a wide cross-section, including activists, MPs and politicians.

Findings

The elected women had not been in place long enough to really do an impact assessment of their terms as elected members. Our focus was more on the level of political awareness, which included awareness of reservation, the level of political participation and panchayat activities.

Surprisingly, only 56 % were aware of the basic issue or reservation in PRIs, despite the fact that they had been elected to reserved seats. Awareness was highest in Delhi (77%), followed by Punjab (70%), HP (59%) where NGOs had tried to create awareness, and least in UP (42%).

As voters, political participation is extraordinarily high (91%) — the largest number being in HP(96%), followed by UP and Delhi at 91%, and Punjab (85%). Most women are extremely aware of their importance as vote banks for parties, and their power to elect or reject a government.

From the point of view of participation in panchayat meetings, a very large number attended these meetings (93.4%), and contrary to popular belief, only 30% were proxy members, whose husbands/menfolk made all the decisions for them. In the absence of their husbands, they were quite aware of various issues, although their political decisions depended entirely on their husbands. Although the phenomenon of *pati panch* is very real, there are many strong, articulate and politically active women elected to the PRIs. With or without party backing, they have succeeded against all odds in making a difference.

As far as panchayat activities went, the initial problems faced by women have been highlighted in many impact studies, such as illiteracy, lack of exposure and training in duties and functioning powers of the panchayat members. Despite these, many women have been able to mobilize attention towards infrastructural facilities for the village. Very few, however, have been able to address gender-specific problems. One exceptional case was in Kangra district, where a road was specifically repaired to facilitate women's work of getting saplings from the BDOs office. Women members took up the issue of widows getting pensions in Punjab and HP. Gender issues have mainly centred around the problem of alcoholism, especially in HP. EWRs have taken the help of *mahila mandals* and NGOs to fight this issue.

Caste

A key mediating factor is caste in North India, and this was borne out by specific case studies from Sultanpur and Banda in UP. Both women members, one the president

of the ZP and the other a municipal councillor, were harassed by the party in power, charged with corruption and faced no-confidence motions. The main reason cited by the women was their backward caste. They felt that upper caste males from political parties were working to remove SC and OBC women councillors so that upper caste women and wives of politicians could be elected to re-establish and perpetuate the nexus of corruption. A telling comment was “all politicians have a price...with politics being restricted to salt, onion and oil.” On the positive side, both women felt that intelligence and awareness, along with education, could help women to fight back.

Caste also plays an important part in getting tickets in formal politics, due to the ‘winnability’ factor. This was the experience of three women from HP who joined politics while in college. They felt that SC women had to face hostility more on account of caste, and not so much due to religion and ethnic identity.

However, an interesting case was that of a Muslim woman from Rudrapur, the first minority woman chairperson of the Municipal Corporation, who was so harassed by the party in power (not her own) that she had to form an NGO, the Teri Mahila Vikas Sansthan, in order to do development work for the community. For the same reasons, another Muslim woman formed an NGO, the Swatantra Mahila Samiti in Meerut, to mobilize Muslim women and men for issue-based agitation. The NGO provides her a forum to take up action at the grassroots, work for people’s needs, and at the same time expand and strengthen her political support base.

Other Mediating Factors

For those women who were aware of reservation, personal motivation was the most important driving force influencing both their entry into politics and their survival. More than half contested because of personal motivation. Such women were politically sensitive, and wished to fight for women’s rights, for development of their areas, and against corruption. Personal motivation was an important factor even for women from conservative families, especially in UP and HP.

Community support was cited as an important factor for contesting elections — ‘because the people asked us to’. Here, the community actually decides who should stand for elections against reserved seats, based on vested interest. The women then have hardly any role to play.

The role of NGOs has been a very important factor in providing catalytic support for the emergence of strong women leaders — e.g., by creating an enabling environment, giving training and mobilizing women for movements against alcohol.

Reserved seats definitely provided the space for the emergence of women (i.e., providing women with a public platform).

Family support was another important factor in controlling the political careers of women — reservation providing the opportunity to put up women and retain power within the family. Such candidates are usually ‘proxy’, but communities appear to have greater confidence in candidates from such families.

Family support has also been the most important factor in overcoming gender biases. Many interviews indicate strong support from husbands.

Obstacles

Interestingly, when asked about obstacles, 83.7% replied in the negative. The actual picture emerged with further probing, and from the FGDS. The response itself suggest the inference that the women had very little interaction with other panchayat members and relevant officers, or were not articulate, or had internalized socially-defined gender roles (and accepted patriarchy, caste and class barriers), or were proxy members.

Patriarchal values, political intimidation from opposition parties or men from the same party, vested groups, and the political and administrative system itself were the major obstacles obstructing the functioning of the elected members. Hostility, ridicule and insensitivity from government functionaries were other factors.

A recurring obstacle articulated by women was illiteracy and lack of education. Although some women felt that illiterate women got more support from their husbands. However, it was clearly seen that the most active and articulate EWRs were highly educated. The exceptions were illiterate women who had a history of political action or association with movements, such as those against alcoholism or on environment issues. Such women do not get intimidated by their lack of education. However, even for them, education would, they feel, enhance their capability to function more effectively.

Dealing with corruption is also a handicap, and honesty among EWRs is seen as a drawback by those who have profited through the years by the existing nexus between officials and vested interest groups.

Reservation has thus provided millions of women an opportunity to fight elections and avail themselves of the 'space' created by the legislation. As indicated, many women have risen to the occasion in spite of great odds. What is required is to strengthen them and at the same time sensitize the political environment to their needs.

Follow-up

Ekatra's study was followed by a year's programme of five workshops to share the findings with respondents. In addition to EWRs, both new and old, and those in-the-making, participants included members of NGOs working with the PRIs, members of SHGs and anganwadi workers. Local problems at the grassroots emerged through interactions which provided an opportunity to share experiences and problems. The workshops — held at Shimla, Kangra, Amritsar, Chandigarh, Banaras, Dehradun and Delhi — threw up many commonalities of experience and suggestions for strengthening the PRIs. With the time lag between the period of conducting the research and the workshops, new issues emerged at the grassroots, while existing impediments remained as challenges to the effective functioning of EWRs. The participation of the Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan in Shimla at Ekatra's request introduced the struggle for Right to Information and Transparency, which provided inspiration to the participants for tackling local issues.

Certain issues common to the States were the rise of alcoholism and use of drugs among young people — especially in Punjab and Himachal. Lack of employment opportunities emerged as a major concern of women, especially as it was a contributory factor in increasing use of smack, gutka, alcohol, etc., by their sons and husbands. As well, political parties during the time of elections had started enticing voters, not only with alcohol, but also with drugs! (This was in Punjab.). Reservation for jobs and

education was a major issue in Uttaranchal, being one of the underlying factors for the move for a separate state. In eastern UP, religion and politics emerged as an important issue in the political life of the region, and polarization was evident right down to the level of the panchayats.

Women's political participation in all the states faced similar obstacles which were identified as:

- Lack of information about the role and mandate of elected members
- Illiteracy and lack of education
- Lack of clarity about the relationships and roles of the panchayat members, the block and district level samitis, and the government hierarchy
- Apathy on the part of government towards panchayats
- Role of political parties during panchayat elections

What emerged with amazing clarity was the deep understanding of many of the EWRs — including the illiterate — of the impact of globalization at the grassroots. It was clear that it is women who predominantly face the primary debilitations of shifts in State commitments.

Women in Punjab spoke about the impact of commercialization of crops on changing food habits. Growing corn had become unprofitable to the extent that even making makki di roti to go with sarso ka sag is becoming difficult, although makki is available in city shops. Basmati rice, which fetched high prices in the market, was bought from them at a third of the market price. Milk is being collected and sold through the milk cooperative and is not available for domestic consumption. Pesticides and injections given to cows and buffaloes to increase milk led to their infertility. Even vultures who eat livestock carcasses were dying due to this and becoming extinct. Flora and fauna was changing, and even butterflies had disappeared. The SHG members felt that rearing goats was a better proposition than cows, which this may also lead to the disappearance of ghee, a staple of the diet of Punjab. No wonder that these grassroots women felt that their roots were being cut.

Reimagining the State

The exercise of reimagining the state is something restricted by the limits imposed on our imagination by knowledge systems, coupled with the fact that women in India have rarely experienced, or been encouraged to imagine, a viable alternative to the organizing principles and functioning of an all-encompassing or overarching State. It would be misleading to assume that there is any undifferentiated universal women's vision globally or nationally. The overwhelming opinion appears to be of a democratic, participatory, accountable and gender-sensitive State.

Barring the articulate women, most others could not distinguish between 'state' and 'government', and posited governmental powers and functions to the State. When women do engage with the State and its institutions, it is with the awareness or consciousness that the State rarely engages with them as autonomous citizens, like it does with men. About 21% of our respondents (from the total sample) said that the State does not represent them. The experience of the State is of a large, complex, contradictory

entity, which is unfriendly and even overtly hostile at times. However, in the absence of an imaginable alternative, the same State remains the welfare state that formulates laws and policies aimed at rectifying social and economic inequalities.

Women's collective and comprehensive vision does not emerge in a well articulated manner, yet inferences can be drawn from women's expectations of good governance and the State. Two major roles are attributed to the State — a provider of services and a protector of law and order and peace. The second could be a commentary on violence, as women bear the brunt of violence and communal riots. Women's vision is affected by existential realities, but as we have seen earlier, they are able to transcend these and demonstrate a global vision.

Women in Punjab presented an extremely negative picture of the existing reality of local governance. According to them, democracy or local self-governance did not exist — the gram sabhas never met and most women were unaware of its role. Consequently, the sarpanch usurped all its powers. Caste and class continue to dominate village politics, and rampant corruption, feudal and patriarchal mores, and indefinite postponement of panchayat elections prevented women panches from exercising their powers.

Women's empowerment has to ultimately be situated in their concept of citizenship — i.e. how they perceive themselves and their sense of their own identity. A gendered notion of citizenship emerged during one of our interviews with an eminent political scientist. Explaining about different kinds of rights associated with their identities as women, workers and voters to a group of women labourers, she was most surprised at their asking about the responsibilities that go with such rights.

One may infer that when women feel they are decision-makers, both rights and duties get defined and a sense of responsibility grows. Women have to shoulder all kinds of responsibility from a very young age. When they are treated as recipients of welfare and handouts, they are deprived of the right to even decide their priorities. The difference between being subjects or decision-makers may be at the heart of empowerment.