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A seat at the table is not enough: gender and political inclusion

51. A seat at the table is not enough: gender and political inclusion

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Women's political inclusion is promoted as a strategy for creating inclusive political institutions and attaining gender justice. The number of women at all levels of government is rising around the world, because of affirmative action and the creation of participatory spaces. However, easing women's access into political spaces does not automatically lead to the promotion of gender-equity concerns in policy-making. The effective participation of women in politics is influenced by the terms on which women are included, by the interplay between formal and informal rules in the political system, and by the presence of autonomous women's movement actors who have broad-based alliances with other state, social and political actors. How these factors play out in differing contexts and how they affect what women do once they enter politics and policy spaces require further analysis.

Many countries in the world recognize equal political rights for women. But in practice, women experience gendered barriers to entering and participating in the political arena, and in influencing decisions to address gender inequity in the distribution of social and economic resources. Intersecting economic and social inequalities further undermine women's ability to exercise political power and access public institutions. Many scholars and activists argue that women's political inclusion, particularly measures for increasing women's participation and representation, would lead to the creation of inclusive political institutions and help attain social justice (Phillips, 1995).

The number of women in government has been rising around the world in recent decades. The global average for women parliamentarians has nearly doubled in the past twenty years, and currently stands close to 22 per cent (UN Women, 2014). In many countries women have made effective inroads in local government, and populate the bureaucracy at all levels in increasing numbers. Women are increasingly gaining a seat at the table where political and policy decisions are made.

What has led to this increase in the number of women in government? Are women becoming accepted as actors in political institutions? Does having a seat at the table allow them to participate effectively in decision-making processes and attain gender justice?

What influences women's political inclusion?

While the number of women representatives in parliament is rising, progress towards attaining gender parity in representation has been slow. The Scandinavian countries take the lead at 41 per cent female parliamentarians, with some Latin American and sub-Saharan African countries performing well at over 30 per cent. Europe, Latin America and Africa take the top three places, while the Middle East and the Pacific lag behind all other regions (UN Women, 2014).

These regional variations can be explained by the presence of gender quotas, the structure of electoral systems, and the measures taken by political parties to include women. In many countries, the adoption of affirmative action measures such as reserved seats and gender quotas on party electoral lists, bureaucracies and state-created community user groups has facilitated women's entry in larger numbers into legislative assemblies, local government, state agencies and participatory citizen's forums. Evidence shows that proportional representation electoral systems lead to more women being elected than first-past-the-post systems with single member constituencies (UN Women, 2014).

Sanctions imposed on political parties for not complying with electoral rules on women's inclusion in party lists are also effective. The requirement to select women expands the pool of potential candidates and creates opportunities for nominating women who might have been overlooked (Krook, 2013).

Beside these factors, a country's political history also matters. Women's participation in critical political movements such as anti-colonial struggles, anti-authoritarian movements, independence movements and armed struggles legitimizes their claim for political inclusion. The examples of Chile, South Africa and Rwanda show that in the post-transition period, women's movement actors and their allies were able to negotiate a better deal for women's inclusion in political offices, and demand gender-equitable reforms, by framing their claims in light of the role played by women during political struggles (Waylen, 2008).

Women's determination and ability to enter politics and participate actively are influenced too by their access to material resources and social and political networks, by social and cultural norms regarding women's participation in formal and informal institutions (such as community spaces),[1] and by the allocation of care responsibilities.[2]

Different types of formal and informal institutional arrangements strengthen or limit women's participation in politics. Studies of women's political recruitment using the supply–demand model reveal gender biases in candidate selection processes and the lack of political opportunities inside political parties (Franceschet et al., 2012). Goetz and Hassim's (2003) comparative study of Uganda and South Africa shows that opportunities for women to participate effectively in electoral and party politics depend on party type (whether informal or rule-based), party ideology (conservative or liberal), the commitment of the senior party leadership to promote women's inclusion, the presence of a strong women's wing inside a party, and the nature and culture of political competition.

Rising levels of campaign finance adversely affect women, as they have a weaker resource base than men. Addressing this imbalance requires strict monitoring of election expenditure caps by state agencies. Lower candidate registration fees for women, and state funding for women candidates, may also increase the number of women candidates.

Political violence also constrains women's participation (UN Women, 2014), which indicates the need to create a level playing field for women and men in the political arena.

The action of senior party leadership to promote women's political inclusion is motivated by both instrumental and ideational concerns (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012). In many developing countries, the decision-making process in political parties is highly centralized and the parties operate in an informal and personalized manner. Here the promotion of women's representation largely depends on the instrumental and ideational concerns of the senior party leadership. These types of party are able to overcome resistance quickly and include a large number of women. Women representatives are able to promote a gender-equity agenda within the party and in politics if they have close personal relationships and networks with the central leadership. However, studies on Uganda show that gains made by women from these forms of inclusion may be limited and short-lived (Goetz and Hassim, 2003).

Impact of women's inclusion in political spaces

Women's entry into political spaces changes social perceptions of their presence in the political arena, creates positive role models for other women to emulate, and over time, reduces prejudice about women's leadership, in the long run promoting their inclusion in politics (Agarwal, 2010). However, evidence is mixed as to whether women's inclusion leads to influence in policy-making. Evidence from Scandinavian countries supports the contention that a critical mass of women in legislatures creates space for raising issues linked to women's concerns. Examples are violence against women, child care and social welfare (Weldon, 2002). The presence of such a critical mass has allowed women parliamentarians in South Africa, Uganda and other developing countries to form a gender caucus or a cross-party alliance to advocate for issues linked to women's rights (Goetz and Hassim, 2003). Research on local government and community forums in developing countries shows that when women have a greater voice, public resources are used to address women's needs such as child health, access to water and employment for women (UN Women, 2014).

However, easing women's access to political office does not automatically guarantee that a gender equity agenda will be promoted in policy-making. Women are not a homogenous group. Class, caste, ethnic and racial interests influence the actions of women representatives. Like their male counterparts, they may or may not raise gender-equity concerns, depending on the context, the available opportunities, the existence of a gender mandate, their links with the women's wing of the party and women's movement actors, and the possible electoral consequences of promoting gender equity concerns (Childs and Krook, 2009).

Another open question is whether greater gender inclusion in formal political institutions leads to a spillover effect in addressing other forms of inequality. In Latin America, women parliamentarians have led resistance to legislation intended to strengthen the rights of domestic workers, the majority of whom are female and from disadvantaged ethnic and racial groups. They needed domestic workers to work long hours for the parliamentarians to be able to participate in politics. However, domestic workers were able to overcome this resistance by building strategic alliances with women's movement organizations, pro-labour political parties and other social movement groups. Cross-country research by Htun and Weldon (2010) shows that the presence of autonomous women's movement organizations that have strong relations with the state bureaucracy, political parties and other social movements, is key to bringing about gender-equitable policy changes. Over the years, broad-based alliances among women's movement actors have promoted formal policy changes that address gender inequality affecting different groups of women.

Gender and political inclusion – what we need to know more about

Most of the scholarly work on 'women in politics' has focused on the effectiveness of quotas and other macro-level institutional arrangements for increasing women's representation. Understanding why women's inclusion is promoted in a specific political context, and the influence it has, requires a broader understanding of the historical context, the interactions between the formal and the informal rules operating in a political system, and the negotiations that take place between the political elites and various social-political actors, including women's movement actors (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012). The weight of these factors varies in different political contexts.

Our current knowledge of how women gain inclusion and how they influence policy outcomes is partial, and we need to generate evidence in the following areas.

Most studies of links between women's inclusion and influence have a narrower focus, and take women's entry as a starting point. This leaves out the broader range of factors that facilitate women's inclusion and the complex pathways through which gender-equitable policy change takes place. Methodologically, tracking backwards from the successful promotion of gender-equity policies and reforms to a wider range of political actors may offer a more nuanced picture of political agency, particularly of how the coalitions and alliances between various actors, and personal relations and networks, influence the terms of women's inclusion and their ability to promote gender-equitable changes in different contexts.

There are also gaps in our knowledge of women's inclusion, in terms of geographical coverage and the level of government. The Scandinavian countries, and Latin and Central America, are well researched. Recently, some African countries have also drawn attention (Krook, 2013), but Asia, with the exception of a few countries, remains largely under-researched. There are also fewer studies of women's inclusion in community-level organizations and local government. Systematic analysis of how women's inclusion affects the functioning of local government and the impact of decentralization on women's inclusion is needed.

We also need to know whether women's inclusion in politics creates gender-inclusive institutions, which in turn depends on the interplay between the formal and informal rules of the political system and how these rules are gendered. There is a need to investigate how informal institutions, such as norms based on customs, illegitimate practices and backdoor deals, shape women's inclusion and subvert or create women's rights in politics and policy-making. Feminist institutionalists have recently started to move in this direction (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). This burgeoning body of work will need to further unpack the impact of clientelist politics on women's inclusion.

These knowledge gaps indicate that while gender inclusion as a strategy has increased women's numbers in formal political institutions, what women do once they enter politics and policy spaces, and how and when they address gender and other forms of inequity, requires further analysis.

Notes

1. Social and cultural norms dictate which public spaces are open to women. For example, community meetings in mosques are inaccessible to women in South Asia. Norms also dictate the kinds of issues women may raise in public and how women should articulate demands.

2. A recent study on women representatives in local government in Bangladesh (Nazneen et al., 2014) revealed that women decided to enter politics after their children had entered their teens or if they were able to employ household help or delegate care and household responsibilities to another family member. The findings indicate that class plays a significant role in women's ability to enter politics.

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