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# **Rethinking Gender Politics in a Liberal Age: Institutions, Constituencies and Equality in Comparative Perspective**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE REPRESENTATION GAP

The persistent, and in some cases growing, gap between indicators of women's political empowerment and those of women's social and economic development must surely be one of the most significant development puzzles of our time. Women's inclusion in the state is a widely noted outcome of political liberalization, evident in two significant developments. In the bureaucratic arena, the creation of gender machineries from the late 1970s fostered the idea of women as a constituency for policy-makers to consider. More recently, women's political access to parliaments around the world has been facilitated by the use of deliberate strategies ranging from formal and informal quotas to reserved seats.

Yet, while women have gained significant access to state bureaucracies and legislatures, particularly in developing countries, access and inclusion do not appear to have delivered the kinds of equality outcomes that many would like to see. Feminist scholarship remains confounded by the question of how and when claims for gender equality are facilitated and or constrained by engagement with the state. Put another way, why has the apparent redistribution of power not resulted in a redistribution of goods? This is not to suggest that no gains have been made through the strategies of engagement thus far; political empowerment and formal equality is not an insignificant achievement by any means. Rather, it is the catalytic effect of political empowerment that appears to be missing - that is, the translation of institutional access to political voice, and from political voice to policy outcomes.

This paper makes a start at addressing this conundrum by focusing on the following three key questions:

- To what extent, and under what conditions, have women in highly unequal societies managed to overcome differences of race, class and geographic location to create effective constituencies for pushing through welfare measures and other gender-sensitive policies that meet the needs of low-income women?
- What constellation of political actors (political parties, states, civil society and social/women's movements) and forces have been most effective in representing and aggregating women's diverse interests and bringing them into the policy arena?
- What are the different constraints across contexts impeding cross-class/race coalitions of women and the translation of their common gender interests into policies?

The paper aims to extend and deepen the debate on the relationship between political access and descriptive representation and equality-enhancing social and public policy. There is a plethora of countries that might be considered and compared, and the paper draws on a wide range of literature from advanced democracies and new democracies. However, I am most interested to consider how powerful constituencies of women might emerge in highly unequal societies. I examine the literature first in a broad comparative manner to identify patterns in the relationships between women and the state. In section 2 of the paper, I lay out the key hypotheses that are offered to explain women's relationship to political power and the state in different parts of the world. I argue that we need to look beyond a narrowly focused analysis of women in politics, and address three aspects of contemporary institutional and political crisis that may offer greater analytical purchase on the impasse in feminist politics. I categorise these broadly as a) the crisis of representation in liberal democracies; b) the impact

of neo-liberal policy orthodoxies on social reproduction and c) the crisis of institutional capacity in developing countries.

Then, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between women's organising and mobilizing, women's representation and policy outcomes, I focus on the relationship between equality activism and the broader political system within which this activism is located. Here I want to expand the debate beyond the politics of women's organizations to consider the ways in which electoral and party systems shape the range of possibilities for the use of integrationist strategies. I argue that these institutions set the parameters within which the representation of women is advanced and determine the extent to which there can be a close relationship between political position and policy effect. In cases where parties are strongly institutionalized and well-entrenched in the population, they are the pre-eminent vehicles for policy influence. However, in situations where they are weakly developed and have not established their legitimacy, other formal institutions such as traditional authorities or informal patriarchal social norms may limit their effectiveness. In such instances, pursuing overwhelmingly state-centric strategies to advance equality may be limited.

I examine two countries in some detail to elaborate my arguments: India and South Africa. Both are postcolonial democracies (India of course being a much older democracy than South Africa), both are characterized by high levels of inequality and strong local traditional power bases, and both have used quotas in different ways over more than one election to bring women into the public political arena. In the case of India, quotas have been used in local councils, while in South Africa they initially were used at the national level and later at the local level. At local level, quotas have been relatively ineffective in South Africa and more effective in India, suggesting that the arena of representation may be a crucial variable in understanding policy effectiveness. Although both countries have strong women's movements rooted in a nationalist tradition, the kinds of demands made on the state have been more systematically focused on specific policy concerns in India (e.g. water, access to economic resources) than in South Africa where the leadership of the women's movement has been relatively less oppositional to the state since 1994.

These commonalities and differences may offer a sharper focus on the questions of when and how poor women may use political access and power to redirect public resources.

## **2. WOMEN, POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND POLICY INFLUENCE: SOME KEY HYPOTHESES**

### **Modernisation and Gender Equality**

The modernization hypothesis is the most dominant explanation for women's access to political power and decision-making. However, this hypothesis manifests itself a variety of ways that one could classify as being on a continuum from 'strong' to 'weak'.

In its strongest form, proponents of modernization assume that economic growth and affluence lead to the expansion of opportunities for women; concomitantly, higher levels of education and participation in the paid labour force erode inequalities in access to political office (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). As women gain representation and voice, they put forward new claims on the state that lead to shifts in the allocation of public resources. Secularisation increasingly displaces religious arguments in favour of gender inequality,

gradually building a new and more egalitarian culture that buttresses women's gains in the public sphere with greater power in the private sphere. If and when gaps in representation persist, whether in terms of numbers of women in elected office, or particular allocations of public budgets to women, the strong modernization hypothesis posits two explanatory factors. Women may choose not to run for political office, preferring other activities to politics. And budgets may not take account of women's specific needs because it may not be evident that gender is a key variable in access to resources. In this view, then, gender equality is directly linked to the level of economic development.

There are several critiques of these arguments. It has been pointed out that economic wealth is not correlated to increases in women's political access in many countries, most notably in the Middle East (Moghadam, 2005). Furthermore, even advanced democracies, which did experience the favourably combined conditions of economic growth, expansion of literacy, increase in women's labour force participation and liberal democracy, did not see a correspondingly significant increase in women's representation or automatic attention to the relationship between private and public inequalities (UNRISD, 2005).

A more modified version of the modernization hypothesis, evident in archetypal form in the Scandinavian social democracies, draws attention to the importance of state intervention to support changes in the market, arguing that gender equality could not be left to the market. Paid labour and unpaid labour are understood as inextricable, and the state has a particular responsibility to create the conditions for women to enter and stay in the paid labour force. In these democracies, women's movements have embarked on a deliberate strategy to push political parties to *both* increase representation of women *and* address women's gendered interests in policymaking. Two important factors in the success of this approach were a) the mobilization of women as an electoral constituency and b) the careful crafting of alliances with trade unions and political parties. The positive effects of the strategy are significant and to a considerable extent the Scandinavian countries have become the benchmark model of the link between women's increased representation and the redirection of public spending to meet the needs of poor and working class women. In particular, the impact of increasing women's representation on introducing 'private' concerns into the public domain of decision-making is notable in all social democracies. The enactment of care policies that socialized a number of the gender-specific burdens of women in households is most explicit in Sweden, but also evident elsewhere. For example, a study of women members of the Australian Senate between 1987 and 1999 found that 'women members were five times as likely as their male colleagues to raise issues such as domestic violence and paid parental/ maternity leave' (Sawer, 2002, p.9). Early analyses of the phenomenon suggested that the crucial variable was the presence of a 'critical mass' of women (Dahlerup, 1988).

This raises the question of whether the particular kinds of alliances and modes of mobilization that facilitated such changes can be replicated in contemporary new democracies. The central difficulties with replicating the relationship demonstrated in the model of political representation leading to equality-enhancing policy outcomes appear to be the following. Firstly, there is a high level of path dependency in this model (that is, a particular historical combination of economic growth and political will that is hard to replicate). The gains that women made in social democracies, particularly in the Nordic countries, appear to have been made in relatively self-contained economies in which there is a virtuous circle between progressive political mobilisation and state policies: that is, with the right kinds of ideologies and strategies in place, political mobilisation can create social consensus with regard to shifts in public spending. Secondly, a crucial factor in the model is

the importance of the alliance between left political parties and feminists, rather than the influence of women per se. Notably, as Marian Sawer (2002, p.6) points out, the correlation between representation and pro poor women policies does not hold when a predominant number of the women politicians are from conservative parties. In the Australian research cited above, for example, there were no notable shifts in spending in the 1990s when the Coalition government held power. A crucial variable must therefore be the existence of progressive pro-equality political parties. Finally, even countries like Sweden adopted quotas eventually to 'guarantee' women's representation. This suggests that political culture arguments are limited (i.e. political cultures that support equality are shallow and may not be sustained).

A rather different version of modernization through the state is to be found in state socialism, where formal gender equality was to a considerable extent imposed from above by the party. In those countries, it was assumed that women's participation in the labour force, together with socialized care for young children, was sufficient to produce equality. However, the persistence of patriarchal assumptions about the division of labour within households was ignored, and gendered hierarchies in wages persisted. The dominance of a single party and the repression of oppositional civil society constrained the emergence of women as a political constituency. Indeed, the equality espoused by feminism came to be associated with the excessive intrusions of the socialist state into the private sphere, making it even more difficult for women to develop strong constituencies to defend the benefits of the old state socialist model in the post-communist, liberal era.

Moving to the weaker side of the spectrum, we find a variant of the modernization hypothesis that emphasizes the role of anti-colonial nationalism in advancing gender equality. Women's movements allied their cause for equality to nationalist, anti-colonial movements and won support for the idea of gender equality through appeal to the modernist, 'forward' (western) looking strategies of nationalizing elites (Yuval Davis, 1997; Jayawardena, 1989). Most anti-colonial nationalist projects also entailed processes of state-building, with formal gender equality inscribed as a corollary. Most analyses of this approach agree that the nationalist route was not highly successful, for a number of reasons. Firstly, to large extent formal rights remained just that: formal rights that existed on paper but not in the daily experiences of women. While post-independence governments in Africa and Asia did initially focus on the provision of goods and services to address the needs of their populations, there was almost no emphasis on the gendered nature of need. Indeed, to a considerable extent the idea that communities (read women) would continue to provide privately for many of their social reproduction needs was very strongly advanced. Women's access to control over important livelihood resources such as land and crops was not deemed important, and when these demands were articulated they were treated as threats to the political project of cultural recognition. The linking of the relative autonomy of local communities to the notion of cultural self-preservation (for example by retaining communal land ownership with control vested in male elders) constrained the ability of feminists to advance different arguments for the socialization of care.

Secondly, while nationalism did promote modernist notions of gender equality, it nevertheless rested on an ideological framework that was profoundly gendered and unable to accommodate equality in practice (Yuval Davis, 1997). Women's representation in post-independence governments was low; more typically, women activists were reintegrated into the domestic sphere. Development itself was understood as a male project, directed at urban male workers.

Thirdly, the state was poorly developed and had little infrastructural or planning capacity to meet the needs of poor people in general. Many postcolonial states in African and Asia degenerated into authoritarian one-party states. The 'activist' postcolonial nationalist governments in Africa, although initially committed to redistribution, did not expand the institutions established by colonialism (executive, civil service, police and army) in ways that consolidated democracy or even their long-term ability to sustain a developmental focus. In particular, institutions that would constrain executive power such as multiparty elections, judicial independence and, outside the state, institutions that might expand the legitimacy of the state and its capacity to represent diverse interests (such as a vibrant civil society) were either severely restricted or actively repressed. By contrast, those institutions that were seen as either enhancing the capacity of elites to manage or to remain in power, such as the military, expanded rapidly. Importantly, however, bureaucratic expansion was not tied to efficiency or to citizen responsiveness and for the most part the political system continues to operate in ways that do not depend on electoral responsiveness. As a result, in sub-Saharan Africa for example, many groups in society disengaged from making demands on the state. Citizens bypassed the state as the locus of their demands, meeting their needs through a combination of informal mechanisms and developing allegiances to local political actors rather than the state *per se*. To the extent that the women did find spaces in the state, this was frequently through their association with powerful male leaders (Mama, 1997). They were seen as elitist and did not build grassroots movements behind gender equality so that existing class bifurcations among women were exacerbated. These developments have a direct impact on the extent to which new strategies for gender equality can be pursued.

### **The challenges of political and economic liberalization**

All variants of the modernization hypothesis have been challenged by late twentieth century developments in capitalism, which have resulted in contradictory processes of liberalization. Political liberalization has opened spaces in the state, enabling women's participation at the highest levels of political decision-making. However, inclusion has ambivalent aspects, being both seductive in its promise of power and also implicating women in the operations of power; institutions trail their historical legacies of hierarchy and authority and are not easily permeable to new modes of operation. This is not to suggest that institutions cannot be changed, of course. Rather, as Georgina Waylen notes, the outcomes may be unpredictable. 'Often, institutional layering – new institutions added in to existing ones...- or institutional conversion, for example if new groups are incorporated, takes place' (Waylen, 2009: 247). All too often women representatives find the equality agenda appropriated and mutated into mechanisms of governance and regulation, losing the ambition of transformation of gendered relations of power. Thus, for example, feminist ambitions to transform decision-making institutions through the strategy of gender mainstreaming were thwarted by the reduction of this approach to technical checklists (Manicom, 2001). In some cases, inclusion *masks* relations of power; there is a superficial redistribution of places in the state but the underlying inequalities of power remain intact. In many respects, the institutionalization of feminist politics has been inimical to project of democratization. It has limited the notion of democracy to inclusion into existing institutions, and marginalised more radical demands for reconfiguring the ways in which power is organized. The democratization of the spaces of power (political parties, legislatures, the civil service) has been difficult to achieve, at best, and neglected at worst. At best, then, pursuing strategies of inclusion into formal politics has produced contradictory outcomes for feminists.

Changes in the environment of policymaking also impact directly on poor people's movements. The locus of economic decision-making in many parts of the world has shifted away from nation-state level and stifled 'sovereignty' and democratic decision-making as far as economic policy-making is concerned, in what Thandika Mkandawire calls 'choiceless democracies' (Mkandawire, 1999). In highly indebted countries, policies may be shaped more directly by global prescriptions and lender conditionalities than by contestation between different constituencies of citizens and the state. The emphasis on cost-recovery through user fees has fuelled, at least in Africa, a crisis of social reproduction where households are unable to provide core needs and where the state has retreated from earlier post-independence commitments to drive development. Women's responsibilities for social reproduction are increasing as social institutions are overburdened by the failures of states to provide the basic infrastructure for care (health, welfare, education). The ideology that the provision of care should be only, or primarily, located in the family has not change the skewed distribution of the costs of and responsibilities for social reproduction (Razavi and Hassim, 2006). The social and political effects of state weakness are significant for women, as citizens continue to rely on traditional networks of reciprocity outside of the formal political sphere. In the absence of strong collective organizations of women that are able to articulate women's gender interests, dependence on those networks may undermine struggles for equality.

Despite the seeming dominance of liberal political models, several commentators point to a crisis of representation that is not gender-specific: that is, a distrust of political parties, weak civil society activism and relatively low membership in trade unions (Harriss, 2002). In many developing countries, political parties have done little to inspire faith in poor people, being accused of corruption and appropriation of public resources. In Africa, particularly, few political parties have successfully transformed themselves from nationalist movements into democratic vehicles of representation (Salih, 2005). Although women's political access has increased as a result of quotas, the emphasis on formal inclusion has led to a weakening of oppositional women's/ feminist movements, so the capacities for holding representatives accountable – the capacities for substantive equality – are weak. Where the political demands of gender equality were posed in earlier periods as a central challenge to the relations of power, in the late twentieth century processes of democratization, the gender-equality agenda has been co-opted and turned into a technical project while more thorough-going feminist demands for transformation of power relations have been marginalized.

Indeed, in many new democracies, women's organizations have become 'development partners' and have transmuted from being political movements to acting as NGOs. This role should not to be downplayed, of course. Women's NGOs have played a vital role in ensuring that political rights are implemented. They are central to ensuring that women are given support to enable them to access grants and other natural resources, and to tackle gender-based violence and address the impacts of HIV/AIDS. As advocates of poor women, NGOs can possess a remarkable capacity to incrementally increase budgetary allocations to poor women and to ensure that poor women have a voice in policy formulation. However, on their own women's development NGOs are constrained by organisational factors such as small staff complements that are funded by donors only for specific projects, and limited resources to articulate radical demands. As they often operate at the local level, conservative, traditionalist forces may be seen as more viable, more autonomous and even more legitimate as a form of local representation. This can act as a further brake on feminists' ambitions to leverage the state (Beall, 2005; Todes et al, 2006; McLean, 2003).

As Molyneux and Razavi (2002) have pointed out, it is evident that the increased emphasis on human rights and equality comes at a historical moment when there are significant shifts in economies and in governance systems. Yet arguments for representation rest on an older democratic model of nation-state, with fairly bounded and 'sovereign' processes of decision-making determined primarily by the coalescence of interests in political parties contesting openly in elections. The emphasis on access and inclusion as the central lever for advancing a feminist agenda tends to assume that the necessary institutions can be created relatively easily through political forces, underestimating the impact of weak and fragile institutions. The extension of this model to parts of the globe where the institutions of participation and representation are weakly developed thus produces new tensions in the operations of democracy and new questions for feminist political activism. In considering why inclusion has contradictory outcomes in so many new democracies, then, we have to take into account that women may find themselves occupying 'empty' spaces. Along with other marginalized groupings, women have relatively little power to shape the allocation of resources. Indeed, the reality that limited power is seen to reside in these spaces may be one explanation for why men have been willing to concede formal political space to women.

Despite these caveats, the emphasis on increasing women's representation is a significant new aspect in discussions of gender equality, and new forms of modernization-based arguments can be detected in the global demand for quotas for women. These demands are modern in the sense that they emphasize the importance of political institutions and assume that there is a clearly-defined set of policy procedures that women can either direct to the aims of equality, or change where there is clear male bias. I outline the key assumptions and arguments behind these debates in the next section.

### **Access and Representation: The outbreak of global quota fever**

A major response to the external political environment is to argue for a radical shortcut to institutional access through the use of quotas. The global demand for quotas came at a moment when the strategies of gender and development and gender mainstreaming seemed to be losing momentum. The demand for between 30% and 50% of representation reasserted the importance of formal politics, but in a different, more competitive context than the bureaucratic arena of national machineries. Shirin Rai (2008, p.90) notes that 'If national machineries for women have been the institutional form that women's engagement with the state has taken, the quotas for women in representative and other institutions of the state have been the single most important policy outcome of this engagement'. Disillusionment with national machineries has given way to optimism about what can be achieved through quotas.

A common lesson from various development approaches adopted by feminists was the importance of addressing structural obstacles to redistributive agendas. Institutions that seemed resistant to women's claims would be dealt a significant exogenous shock by the entry of a critical mass of women, forcing policy shifts in a way that the bureaucratization approach failed to produce. In this context, the strategy of quotas has come to dominate global feminist discourses on how institutional and political blockages may be tackled. Additionally (perhaps more importantly), the strategy of quotas appears to promise the reappearance of politics in the area of gender policy. 'Quota fever' seems driven by an urgency to cut through bureaucratic resistance to equality demands.

It is historically early to make a judgment on the effectiveness of quotas in advancing policies in the interests of poor women. For one thing, it is difficult to present a case for direct causality between representation and policy outcomes (see Beaman, Duflo et al, 2006); causal generalizations across a wide range of very different countries are bound to ignore the specificities of politics in individual countries, to underplay path dependence and over-emphasise the agency of women parliamentarians. As the previous section has shown, women's equality gains are the product of a range of diverse policy influences. Secondly, it may well be that quotas matter most because of their symbolic impact on the political order rather than because of their impact on policy formation in any direct way. That is, regardless of the claims that women might make on the state, quotas demonstrate in dramatic fashion that women are citizens.

Yet, the bulk of the arguments in favour of (or against) quotas rest on a far stronger claim that representation matters *because* it is an avenue through which constituencies of women can pursue policy and legislative demands that advance gender equality (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). Beaman et al (2006) point to research that shows that women and men have different policy preferences, particularly when it comes to support for social sector expenditures. They argue that improving women's representation will improve wellbeing in society as a whole. Other arguments centre on women's apparently more participatory and inclusive style, and the assumption that women are less likely to be corrupt and thus will improve the overall quality of governance (World Bank 2001); as Goetz points out this assumption is difficult to test. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action argues that 'women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account' (Goetz, 2006, p.88).

In other words, women's political participation is crucial, if not sufficient, for gender and development. The weakly tested aspect of the expectations discussed above is not that participation is necessary but rather that *representation through quotas* will kick-start participation, and that participation will lead to better (more precise and better targeted) articulation of the different interests of constituencies of women. In order for the hypothesis to be tested we need much more careful research on how quotas operate *after* elections as well as how different parliamentary systems function. We are indeed seeing a shift in research on quotas to address this key question, with much more nuanced analysis of the impact of different *kinds* of quotas and different ways in which they are applied (Childs and Krook, 2006; Krook, 2007; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). Still, there is a tendency to focus too narrowly on quotas, in my view, and too little on the overall political and institutional context in which they operate. As a result, contemporary feminist analysis of representational politics often neglects to address precisely when *gender* matters, as distinct from the manifestation of a series of crises within liberal democracy.

An overarching question relating to the use of quotas is the paradox of *why* men would allow women to take seats in legislatures when they may themselves be displaced? One reason is that in these new democracies, elections conducted under new rules and with new demarcations of voting districts allowed women to enter the political process without directly displacing male incumbents (although competition for a limited number of seats does imply that the use of quotas will reduce the opportunities for aspiring male politicians). Where the political landscape is dominated by single party, quotas can be a relatively costless strategy that has little impact on election outcomes. Reserved seats, which add new opportunities for women to get elected but do not interfere with the underlying architecture of seats and

constituencies, are similarly costless politically. By way of contrast, in one of Africa's oldest and most stable multiparty democracies, Botswana, quotas are resisted by political parties, partly because they would alter the gender composition in a 'winner takes all system', i.e. some men would lose their seats. Similarly, stable Mauritius has not adopted quotas – in the absence of violent political conflict, it has retained the first past the post electoral system with no foreseeable plan to change the electoral system. Designing the appropriate electoral system is therefore key to the acceptance of quotas, as these determine the nature of the relationship between elected representatives, political parties and constituencies. I consider how electoral systems act as mediating institutions of representation in the next section.

### **Electoral systems and political parties**

Studies of transitions from authoritarian systems show that political liberalization on its own does not change the distribution of political power; women may continue to be under-represented in legislatures. The experiences of Central and Eastern Europe are instructive in this regard; there, democratization resulted in the exit of women from formal politics in the immediate aftermath (Matynia, 1995). The reasons for this are varied, but the crucial determinants of women's access to legislatures are the nature of electoral competition (particularly the extent of violence accompanying elections) and how the electoral system is organized. The impact of political violence in driving women out of political competition is self-evident and I will not address it here, for reasons of space.

Over the longer term, assuming that violence is reduced or absent, it is the nature and rules of electoral competition that play the key role in determining the relationship between elected representatives, political parties and constituencies. The character of political parties, their openness to influence from constituencies other than deeply entrenched party elites, and the degree to which electoral manifestoes bear any relationship to the policies parties pursue when in office are central questions that bear on the quality of representation. Electoral rules and systems do not only determine the outcomes of elections, but also shape processes of representation. In feminist literature on representation to date, however, far more attention has been placed on analyzing the outcomes of different systems than on the processes; as a result, the consensus view among quota activists is that Proportional Representation (PR) systems are the most favourable for women, and Closed List PR is particularly effective in increasing women's representation. Little attention is paid to how the PR system works in practice, and the democratic costs of the system are less frequently detailed in discussions of quotas. Yet, if we are concerned not only with increasing the numbers of women in legislatures but also (and more so) in ensuring that constituencies of poor women are able to advance their demands on public resources, then attention to political process is vital.

In practice, PR systems are a double-edged sword for feminists. On the one hand, a PR system allows progressive parties to bypass customary and cultural objections to women's election – no small factor in societies where conservative religious forces dominate civil society. On the other hand, PR also allows parties to establish mechanisms of control over elected leaders and exacerbate party paternalism. PR systems breed loyalty to party rather than constituency, and this tendency is exacerbated in political systems where the conditions for full and free contestation among different interest groups is limited. Tripp (2006) argues that in Uganda, for example, allegiances to the National Resistance Movement at times hampered the ability of women MPs to support legislation favoured by the women's movement (see also Tamale, 1999). Similar concerns have been expressed in the South

African case, where women MPs have found it difficult to establish a set of priorities for feminist intervention. A strong dominant party with centralist political culture results in women MPs being more likely to believe that policy-making is legitimately the responsibility of party elites.

To be sure, the control of party elites over elected representatives is not unique to the proportional representation system; similar processes may operate in constituency-based systems although they are less overt. For example, Basu (2006, p. 31) notes that in India, 'the power of women MPs is generally very limited. Because they are expected to support the party line rather than formulate their own agenda, they have accorded low priority to issues concerning women'.

The ability of women representatives to mobilize within their parties and their willingness to challenge party hierarchies is an important determinant of the extent to which women will be effectively represented, yet individual women MPs often find it difficult to develop the confidence and political base from which to push for gender equality platforms. The argument for a critical mass suggests that at the tipping point of 30% women MPs can begin to develop significant mechanisms of support. In many countries parliamentary women's caucuses have been mooted as a strategy for setting priorities and building support and confidence among women MPs. However, this depends on how the electoral system structures the relationship between representatives and constituencies. The challenge is therefore whether and how women's gender interests can be articulated in a way that is distinct from their party interests and identities. Uganda is an intriguing example in this respect. There women are elected to seats reserved for women, by an electoral college made up of women and men councillors, but rather than unambiguously representing women, are required to represent the district as a whole. Unlike other special groups (soldiers, youth, workers and people with disabilities), women are not elected members of their group, arguably because the relative strength of the women's movement might result in women MPs who are hostile to the NRM leadership (Tamale, 1999; Tripp, 2006). (Independent women's organizations have been key opponents of Museveni's attempts to lift term limits on the president, for example). This means that women MPs remain beholden to the movement as the primary political force and that the election of women MPs who might challenge movement policies in parliament is as unlikely as in a multiparty PR system. As Tripp argues, this has led women's movement activists to argue for a change in the electoral process so that the women's seats are elected by universal adult suffrage – unsurprisingly, a move opposed by the president.

These tendencies suggest, in order to be successful, democratic women's movements would have to move quickly to buttress the access to legislatures won in transitional periods or through the use of quotas to build strong movements outside parliament that will sustain women's representational gains. A central finding from analyses of transition and democratization is that women cannot rely on political parties as their only vehicles for representation (Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Waylen, 2007). These studies reinforce the importance of strong organizations in the women's movement that may have relationships with political parties but also have an independent existence from parties. This ensures that women are not only mobilized for their votes but as electoral constituencies – that is, constituencies with clearly articulated policy interests.

African experiences of quotas implicitly reinforce the importance of linking representation to accountability. Formally, this accountability operates both internally (within political parties)

as well as externally (accountability to constituencies). In most African democracies, however, political parties are poorly institutionalized and operate in highly centralized fashion. Opposition parties tend to be weak and political contestation seldom revolves around debating the content of political manifestoes. Rather, histories of struggle against colonialism and accusations and counter-accusations of corruption – fiscal or electoral – are the stuff of party contestation. In conditions where the basic principles of free and fair elections are constantly violated by the party in government, quotas can achieve very little unless they are backed up by strong campaigns to change the rules of the game. In some cases, they can even harm struggles for procedural democracy. For example, Ugandan feminists have argued that Museveni's acceptance of reserved seats for women might have helped give women seats in parliament but were based on an attempt to create a solid and reliable block of women supporters of NRM in government. At crucial moments, this dependent bloc of women MPs observed silently as Museveni repressed opposition to the National Resistance Movement.

Of course, women can benefit from multipartyism, even if women's organizations have to affiliate to a party in order to have political voice. Representation works best in multiparty systems where several parties are well-institutionalised, have clear procedures of accountability for their political actions and represent a diversity of interests. In these cases, we see evidence of the contagion effect, where constituencies of women can push parties into supporting gender equality because of the threat that they can vote for other parties (Welch and Studlar, 1988). In Sweden, for example, feminists successfully advanced the argument that they would switch their allegiances from the Social Democratic Party if women's views on party policies (such as nuclear weapons) were not taken into account. Without the threat of electoral retaliation, strategies that focus exclusively on descriptive representation make limited contributions to democratization.

In mass parties that have emerged from nationalist movements, for example South Africa's African National Congress or Zimbabwe's ZANU (PF), national women's organizations operate as the women's wing of the party and in both cases this link enabled women to push successfully for legislative reform in favour of gender equality. However, the cost was to underscore the message that the only valid avenue for political voice is through the nationalist party, based on the assumption that the nation is a singular homogeneous entity with one legitimate representative party. Similarly, support for gender quotas in many African countries was won by women's movements aligned with dominant parties and has reinforced the hegemony of that party. If opposition parties were to develop their own internal women's wings, however, the landscape could change. This would entail an acceptance that political constituencies are not pre-given, or the moral preserve of one particular movement/party. The relationship between representatives and constituencies would then have to be socially and politically constructed relationship and would require constant nurturing and building of political trust.

The diversity of political parties, and not just their multiplicity, also matters. As I noted in the previous section, demands for gender equality are most likely to win favour where there are left parties competing for power, and especially when left parties win government office. The dominance of ethnically-based and religious parties in many new democracies acts as a barrier to the gender equality agenda. As Amrita Basu (2006, p.5) shows, 'they generally do not provide women greater access to institutional power within the party.'

One central factor in new democracies, often ignored in feminist literature that focuses primarily on increasing women's access to the state, is that political parties and state

institutions are not always legitimate in the eyes of voters. John Harriss (2002) has termed this a crisis of representation: a profound disbelief among citizens that political parties can *represent* the interests of anyone other than a small band of elites. This legacy of authoritarian or dysfunctional states has a direct bearing on the extent to which women (along with other marginal groups) advance their claims through political parties, or make collective claims on the state rather than falling back on social networks of reciprocity. The lack of trust of ordinary women and men in the possibility of effective representation by elites in political parties is not easily resolved by greater access of women to elected office. Indeed, where newly elected women are beholden to political elites, it can exacerbate the view that poor people are being manipulated into supporting a sham of democracy. For example, in South Africa recent struggles for power within the ANC have revealed a cleavage between feminists in the party who have benefited from the affirmative action of policies of President Thabo Mbeki, and grassroots-level poor women who support the populist vision of his rival Jacob Zuma. For the latter, gender equality is a project of elites – especially one that puts a few well-connected women into political office - that has done little to change the lives of poor women.

Comparing new democracies with older ones, where women have benefited from the alignment of the equality agenda of the women's movement and the social democratic agenda of left parties and social movement, suggests that factors other than the assertion of 'progressive' interests by political parties is needed. In highly unequal societies, in particular, to be effective in representing the interests of poor women parties themselves need to be democratized (Basu, 2006). That process involves looking beyond party lists to the internal processes by which parties make decisions, the ways in which parties recruit candidates, and the relationships between party leaders and party members.

Importantly, the ability to democratize political parties, enforce accountability and 'clean up' the electoral game is dependent on the strength of women's organizations in civil society, and particularly on their ability to name and frame the demands of the different groups of women they represent, and the development of strong relationships between women legislators and their supporters. Demands for greater representation of women have historically emerged from social movements that pressurize political parties to place women on candidate lists and to take up the concerns of women citizens. As Basu notes, party-movement alliances have been extremely effective in organizing women. Social movements, including and at times especially women's movements, push at the boundaries of what is 'political' and hence are able to draw new issue areas into public deliberation processes. However, on their own, they also have a tendency to diffuse political agendas, either by making programmatic demands that are so far outside the boundaries of accepted political discourse as to marginalize themselves (for example, demands by the Landless People's Movement in South Africa for mass occupation of property) or because, on the other end of the spectrum, they can only agree on a minimal agenda.

Yet, the relationship between women parliamentarians and the women's movement is as difficult as the relationship between women activists and leaders *within* political parties. In some respects there are organic political ties within these spheres; many women parliamentarians cut their political teeth in women's organizations. As a result, the relationship between party/parliament and civil society can often be fluid as women activists can move back and forth between state and civil society. This fluidity may enhance policy influence but can also have negative impacts in countries with small political elites. Close personal and political relationships can breed a sense of loyalty to comrades that undermines

criticism. Yet even if political elites were a much larger segment of the population, there are inherent tensions in this relationship. Anne Summers (1986) has characterized this as the tension between missionaries (activists in civil society) and mandarins (politicians) with each expecting relationships of support and accountability that may be hard to fulfil. Accountability relationships depend on strategies to increase women's access to political office working in tandem with strategies to strengthen women's organisations outside the state; in other words, on strengthening civil society and particularly social movements in civil society that are advocating democratisation.

In none of the modernist approaches to equality is there sufficient attention to what the relationship is between political equality and economic equality, and specifically how to use political representation to advance social and economic equality between women and men and across the category women (i.e. between classes). This raises the question of when representation can be used effectively to leverage economic and social demands. It is important to note that conflict and contestation have been central to the achievement of progressive social and economic policies (Piven and Cloward, 1980). If electoral strategies are to be used then, it is important to hold on to the notion of electoral conflict as central to representation struggles, and to ensure that there are relationships of accountability between the political representatives and constituencies of women.

### **3. REPRESENTATION AND POLICY OUTCOMES: COMPETING EVIDENCE FROM INDIA AND SOUTH AFRICA**

The discussion in previous sections of this paper shows that the process of forming sustainable constituencies that impact on policymaking is complex. Women's organisations' effectiveness is shaped by broader institutional and political constraints as well as by their own internal dynamics of defining interests and creating collective identity. It is also shaped by choices about how to frame women's politics, and where to locate the focus of political energies: the macro level of the national state, the local level, or outside the state altogether.

In addressing the relationship between representation and policy outcomes in India and South Africa, I focus on comparing policy outcomes relating to both strategic gender interests and women's practical needs, using the familiar distinctions outlined by Maxine Molyneux. How can the national level of state intervention – often seen as the locus of 'strategic interventions' – be buttressed by interventions to improve women's condition at the local level? How are we to make sense of the impact of struggles over delivery of practical needs on strategic interests? It is now commonplace to note that the boundaries between strategic and practical interests are highly porous; what then is the impact of women's struggles at the local level in advancing strategic interests? Finally, how are the bounds of political possibility for equality arguments shaped by the nature of the political system itself?

South Africa and India offer the opportunity to explore such questions. Both countries have explicitly addressed demands of women's organizations for increased representation of women by adopting quotas. In both countries, the association between anti-colonial nationalist movements (the Congress Party in India and the African National Congress in South Africa) and women's movements has been the key to the effective organization of women (Basu, 2006; Hassim, 2006). South Africa has adopted national and local government quotas; voluntary at national, legislated at local. In India there is resistance to national quotas, but a system of reserved seats has been implemented at the local level. At national parliament

level, comparing the two countries demonstrates the striking difference a quota can make to electoral outcomes. In South Africa, the use of a voluntary quota brought close to 28% representation of women in elected seats, increasing over the course of three elections to 33%. The knock-on effects were also significant, as women also entered key positions in Cabinet. In India, representation in national parliament is at 7.9% and at state level 5%, despite 60 years of democracy. Nevertheless, in both South Africa and India the modernist character of the nationalist movement resulted in some crucial gains for women in the area of formal equality in the immediate period after the installation of democracy. In both countries, though, commitment to equality wavered when it came up against deeply entrenched cultural interests of local elites (Basu, 2006; Hassim, 2006).

There are also important institutional differences between the two countries. India is a stronger multiparty democracy than South Africa, although this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Basu shows that higher levels of party competition have disrupted traditional patronage systems, and increased the extent to which women are treated as important electoral constituencies resulting in more overt competition for women's votes and consequently direct attention to women's interests in party manifestoes (Basu, 2006, p. 21). In South Africa, the ANC remains the dominant party by a significant electoral margin, is historically confident of women's votes and therefore appeals to women's interests tend to be of the moral and rhetorical rather than policy-specific nature. A second difference is that representation through political parties is not central at local level in India, while in South Africa parties (and especially the African National Congress) operate at all levels. This raises the interesting question of what effect parties have on women's performance as representatives. As the discussion in the previous section shows, political parties play significant roles in gender activism. Political parties set the boundaries of women's action, may act as a conservatizing force, and may be hostile to women. On the other hand, the absence or weakness of parties limits the access of all groupings of the poor to the state, and makes women dependent on other male networks of kin and local power brokers.

### *The quota in South Africa and India*

In both India and South Africa, demands for representation of women were pressed within nationalist movements before the advent of democracy although the demand for special forms of representation is relatively new. In India, the demand for reserved seats first emerged in the 1920s, but was dismissed as a strategy by women's organisations as it was seen to dilute the demand for universal suffrage and equality. Similarly, in South Africa, ANC women demanded equality of status in the ANC and sought to expand their access to power but did not make demands for special mechanisms until the early 1990s, when the transition to democracy opened the space to adopt a new approach. In both India and South Africa, gender activists had to contend with the argument that giving women special representation would be a slippery slope to creating reserved seats for ethnic and other minorities. In both cases, a modernizing nationalism that emphasized homogeneous national identity over particularistic identities was influential on the strategic choices of the women's movement. In both countries, the women's movement chose the role of being subordinate to the nationalist struggle rather than taking the autonomous, feminist route. However, the recognition of affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution in 1950 opened the door to broadening the list of 'special' groups to include women. In South Africa, as well, the recognition of the need for affirmative action to redress race inequalities in the constitutional discussions of the 1990s provided a framework in which to include women as a 'disadvantaged' group.

The outcomes were, of course, different. In India, the large and continuing gap in representation after two decades of independence reopened the discussion of reserved seats and it took yet another two decades of debate before it was agreed that the principle of equality (i.e. no special mechanisms) would be retained at the national level but that reserve seats for women would be introduced, by special amendments to the Constitution, at the local level of *panchayats*. In South Africa, neither quotas nor reserved seats were written into the constitution, but the ANC adopted a voluntary quota for national electoral lists and this had a knock-on effect in increasing the numbers of women on other party lists. At local government level, after considerable mobilization by the women's movement, a quota was legislated for some seats. Thus, by the mid 1990s, both countries had quotas newly in place at local government level and South Africa made dramatic strides in increasing women's representation at the national level.

In practice, there are some key differences in the way in which affirmative action for women operates in Indian and South African local government, although both systems are based on the over-riding principles of democratization and decentralisation. The Indian system reserves one-third of seats for women *in general* in each level of *panchayat* (i.e. village cluster, block and district levels). In addition, women in Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have one third of seats reserved for their ethnic groupings set aside as well. The positions of chairpersons of *panchayats* are also allocated by a one-third reservation for women. The reservation is rotated randomly among constituencies and *panchayats* to ensure a wide spread, as well as to limit 'seat-fixing' where male leaders put forward female candidates as proxies. Seats designated as 'women's seats' in one election revert to being 'general' seats in the next election. Representatives stand in their individual right rather than as political party representatives, and the seats designated as 'reserved' are only announced eight days before the election, after candidates have been nominated.

In theory, a knock-on effect should be evident in this case as well, as the incentives to nominate women have increased. Indeed, five million contested the available one million reserved seats, and in the non-reserved seats as well, there were examples of women running against and defeating men albeit in small numbers (Baviskar, 2003: 3). In practice, both the use of female proxies and 'inheritors' - the notion that elected positions rightfully belong to certain families and clans - continues to limit the effectiveness of women's representation and of quotas themselves as women with political aspirations of their own can be kept out of political office. The rotation of seats itself is a problem for women politicians, as it means they are unlikely to be returned when the reservation shifts to another district, thus limiting the development of political experience among women (Sujaya and Jain, 2000). A perverse consequence of the reserved seat is the perception among both male leaders and the public that the remaining two-thirds seats are 'male seats' (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, p. 102).

Despite these problems, the effect of the strategy of reserved seats was dramatic. In the first round of *panchayat* elections (1994 and 1995) nearly one million women entered representative institutions. As Vasanthi Raman points out, far from Indian women being politically passive, they were waiting for the opportunity to participate. In an interesting further development, in a small number of *panchayats* in Maharashtra and West Bengal, only women were elected, in some cases because women exploited differences among men to ensure that they had control over councils and in other cases because the powerful contesting factions of men decided to step back from contesting the seats. No doubt, as Baviskar notes, the men 'considered *panchayat* positions as unattractive in terms of money and power- as not worth expending political capital to avert small-scale factional feuds. Besides, (they) were

confident that they could manipulate *panchayat* decisions by proxy' (Baviskar, 2003, p. 4). Perhaps not surprisingly, the all-women *panchayats* did not survive a second term.

In South Africa, more widely known for the dramatic entry of 30% of women into the national parliament in 1994, local government representation is equally complex. The local government electoral system differs from the national and provincial electoral system of pure proportional representation. In the elections of metropolitan councils and local councils (i.e. local councils with wards), half the councilors represent wards and half are chosen from party lists in the order in which their names appear on the lists. Voters in metropolitan councils cast two ballots, one for the metro council (PR) and one for the ward elections. Voters in local councils with wards cast three ballots, one for the local council (PR), one for the ward elections and one for the district council. Voters in local councils without wards cast two ballots, one for the local council (PR) and one for the district council. Voters in district management areas cast two votes, one for the district council (PR) and one for the district management area (PR). On the PR lists a legislated 30% quota for women exists; in 2006 the ANC tried to institute a 50% quota for women on its own party lists but the outcome was uneven due to male resistance in certain electoral districts. Women are overwhelmingly more likely to get into local government through PR rather than ward elections.

The mixed member representative system seeks to combine the accountability of direct personal representation with the equity and representivity advantages of proportional representation (PR). In the ward elections the ward councillor need not represent a party; he or she can be an independent and a strict majority applies. In addition to their elected members municipal councils may also include traditional leaders in their proceedings but the number of traditional leaders may not exceed 20% of elected councillors and traditional leaders sit on councils *ex officio*, having no voting rights. Ward councilors are part time while PR councilors are full time officials. Unlike the Indian framework of affirmative action, there are no quotas for women in these leadership positions, with the consequence that few women chair council committees.

In both India and South Africa, feminist sceptics have suggested that the relative ease with which political affirmative action was achieved, especially at the local level should alert observers to potential weaknesses in the strategy (Kishwar, 1996; Baviskar, 2003; Hassim, 2006). Among the arguments offered is that quotas and reserved seats are easy to assign to marginalised social groups when the resources they control are minimal and the power to effect real shifts in resource allocation small. In the next section I address the extent to which such scepticism is justified.

*The impact of representation: has access translated into influence?*

Has institutional change facilitated the introduction of new interests and new constituencies in politics in these countries? In particular, are expectations that decentralizing power and decision-making is good for poor women? Let us examine the overall systemic effects first, bearing in mind the comparative discussion in section 2 that pointed to the mediating role of institutions and the limits on political agency of formal institutional design.

In South Africa, the general context of massive legislative reform to remove racism as well as a redistributive approach to public spending by the African national Congress provided unique opportunities for women parliamentarians to address sexist laws and policies. As a result, most legal discrimination has been removed and some aspects of women's gender

needs – access to maternal health, grants to support children, access to water, electricity and housing – have become part of the government’s social sector budgeting. For a range of institutional and political reasons, however, the impact on women’s position has not been entirely positive and on some indicators – for example maternal mortality – women’s position has worsened (Hassim, 2008). At local government level, the constitutional framework emphasizes democratic, inclusive and participatory local government, stipulating that it should be just, equitable and non-racial, as well as efficient, effective, productive, accountable, responsible and responsive. Yet neither economic nor political decentralization is strong in practice. Institutions of local democracy and participation – ward and district councils and municipalities – are poorly developed.

South African political culture is marked by increasingly strong centralization of decision-making. The civics movement, in which women played an important role in highlighting ‘bread and butter struggles’ in early 1980s, has been all but swallowed up by the shift of activists into the state. Civil society capacities to interact with political representatives and state bureaucracies is weak, unlike the Indian case where, as Heller (2001) points out, civil society has retained a strong dimension of calling public officials to account. The women’s movement is particularly weak at the local level in South Africa, in part because the burden of HIV/AIDS fall most heavily on women, leaving little time or energy for political involvement. Despite the quota system and formal decentralization, then, there has been no redistribution of power.

In the South African framework of local government there is a very strong emphasis on participatory planning through integrated development plans (IDPs). But lack of technocratic ability on government side and weakly organized constituencies on civil society side have resulted in these processes being contracted out to private consultants at high cost, with participation being reduced to once-off comment on the draft IDP, and no commitment to responding to critiques. Most importantly, final IDPs are not linked into budget processes, as South Africa does not have a version of the Indian ‘people’s budgets’ similar to those managed by *panchayats* (where budgets are a council responsibility). As a result, in South Africa women councilors have very little oversight powers in relation to budgets, nor is there enforceable budgetary accountability at the local level.

As a governing party, the ANC has insulated itself from society. Large majorities have weakened party democracy as well as cut the ANC off from civil society. Indeed, the ANC has become increasingly hostile to opposition and to the idea of an independent civil society. Under the Mbeki leadership, the ANC neglected the process of building the party from the bottom up so there was little incentive to strengthen local branches. This precipitated a palace coup in 2007, when Mbeki was deposed as ANC president and replaced by Jacob Zuma, who promised to return the party to its grassroots members. Nevertheless, it is still the case that effective leaders at local level are rapidly siphoned into upper reaches of party. Furthermore, measured against the democratic criteria of voice and agency, women’s inclusion into formal systems has not opened spaces for women to articulate agendas that are different from those of political elites and I have argued elsewhere that there has not been a strengthening of egalitarian norms in the public sphere (Hassim, 2009; see also Walsh, 2009).

Traditional authorities continue to be important at the local level because they performed key roles in local administration during apartheid and are the *de facto* state in the rural areas. Also, because they have been politically important in terms of delivering rural constituencies to ANC, they were able to secure a privileged and protected position in local governance –

and have been resilient in their opposition to the democratic state, and to any erosion of their customary authority. Although legislation directs that they work together with democratically elected local authorities, they frequently resist or are too strong for local authorities to bypass. Indeed, research suggests that in many rural areas, citizens are more likely to trust traditional authorities than municipal elected bodies. This is a finding that cuts across gender, despite the fact that women have little to no chance of participating in decision-making in traditional bodies, and the chiefs have fiercely resisted gender equality arguing that this is outside of African tradition (Amoateng, 2007).

However, there are attempts to increase women's voice in rural areas. The male stranglehold on traditional leadership was challenged as far as the Constitutional Court, which ruled in June 2008 that a woman could inherit the chieftaincy. In rural areas under the chief's jurisdiction, access to land is the chief's jurisdiction and there is no private ownership of property. Women remain responsible for subsistence level food production and are therefore dependent on chiefs to access land. This makes open challenge very difficult for rural women, and much of the challenge to traditional authorities has come from urban women (Claassens and Ngubane, 2003). The Rural Women's Movement, which effectively negotiated for women's rights at the time of the constitutional negotiations, is now virtually defunct. In some rural areas of KwaZulu Natal, a compulsory levy is paid to the king 'without understanding why or seeing any benefit' (Beall, 2005). As a result of customary law women are not taxpayers in their own right, so even were popular budgets to be introduced it would be difficult for women to use such leverage. The Traditional Leadership Act establishes a quota of 33% of women in traditional councils, of which 25% have to be elected by women. But this is in a context where 40% of council members are elected and 60% comprise traditional leaders and 'elders' selected in terms of custom (Claassens and Ngubane, 2003).

In urban local government, women have participated in some ward committees, e.g. in Cato Manor where women played key roles in the competition for development resources in a highly volatile context, and ensured that public resources were used to improve street lighting, clean up parks etc (Beall and Todes, 2003). But such examples are few and far between. More typically, women's NGOs have been co-opted into development partnerships with the state, without being able to set agendas or partnership terms.

Research into South African women's experiences of local government by Todes, Williamson and Sithole (2006) provides some interesting findings about both voter and politician preferences. At local level women do tend to approach women councilors with their needs because they are seen to be more likely to be understanding of women's particular circumstances and to react appropriately. The wide range of issues raised with councilors included HIV/AIDS, rape and domestic violence, infrastructure, employment and food security. Despite these expectations, it is difficult to find evidence that women's position in councils had a beneficial impact on women. Although there is a requirement of 50% participation of women in some committees –e.g. water and sanitation, imposed by the national government, the leadership of these committees is nevertheless in the hands of men. Women councilors lack influence. Men are hostile or dismissive, and women more likely to get ahead politically in career terms when they put energies into 'mainstream' committees and issues rather than when they are seen to be taking up 'women's' needs. In council raising gender issues is seen to be a plea for 'special interests'. Sometimes powerful champions for women's interests emerge but they tend to be isolated and their initiatives are not institutionalized or sustained so collapse on the departure of the champion. Interestingly,

however, where special interest areas are conceded to women, most notably provision of water, women are able to participate effectively including selecting locations for taps, recruiting labour and co-ordinating maintenance of the infrastructure. Men tend to exit this committee, though, so there are 'ghettoising' effects. Furthermore, in larger councils water delivery is outsourced to private companies, cutting across all the equity commitments.

Apart from the systemic and attitudinal barriers to effective representation, which are external factors, there is a range of constraints that stem from women's lack of experience in governance. Women councilors have little technical, programmatic support in making an impact on municipal operations. There is little understanding of 'gender' on the whole, and especially little understanding of what gender mainstreaming might entail, although there is a better grasp of what women's needs are. Where there are clearly defined 'needs' e.g. water and electricity, women councilors do make some impact. Women have less impact when attempting to deal with strategic gender interests, e.g. transforming gendered structures of land ownership or political decision-making, where the commitments to equality come with real costs for those holding power. Todes et al (2006, p. 35) conclude that 'projects address women's practical needs, and do not necessarily serve to transform their position'.

As Patrick Heller (2001) points out, for all kinds of marginalized groups, 'successful decentralization requires politically orchestrated action from above. Powers must be shifted, monies devolved, laws and regulations promulgated and groups opposed to decentralization – recalcitrant bureaucrats, oppositional parties, patronage politicians – circumvented or neutralised.' Perhaps more so than at national government level, the South African case suggests that effective use of representation at the local level requires women's movements to be well-organised and policy-articulate. There is some evidence that women are beginning to organise at local level against water and electricity cut-offs and evictions. Interestingly, they are organizing within social movements that are not specifically using a gender or feminist lens on the state, although when interviewed women tend to use feminist language (Miraftab, 2006).

Initial research on the Indian experience of reserved seats is somewhat more hopeful about the prospects. The systemic effects have been most striking, as the large-scale entry of women in local government has disrupted notions of who can be politically active in society. In a major research project led by Chattopadhyay and Duflo, the relationship between reservations and policy outcomes was examined in two states, West Bengal and Rajasthan. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2003, p. 2) argue unequivocally that 'women invest more in goods that are relevant to the needs of local women: water and roads in West Bengal and water in Rajasthan.' Addressing the question of women acting as proxies for men, their findings are also in stark opposition to anecdotal accounts. Women, they find, are consistently more responsive to women's needs than men. They find that local leaders, even women and Scheduled Castes, do have control over resources and decisions. Furthermore, the presence of a women chairperson of *panchayat* has positive effects on overall participation of women in *panchayat* activities, with a corresponding decline in the participation of men. They find great improvements in child health and attendance at schools. Another paper arising out of the same research project argues that investment in public goods as a whole is considerably higher in villages with reserved seats for women (Beaman et al, 2006, p.4)

By contrast, some case studies are pointing to slightly more nuanced outcomes. For example, Lama-Rewal's research in Calcutta finds that an overwhelming number of elected women belonged to higher castes, had university education and came from business and the

professions. The elite character of these women improves the quality of political resources to which they have access, as well as the financial resources to run campaigns. She points out that the ability of elite candidates to 'buy' votes through patronage is not insignificant. Although women enter the system, many of the old rules continue to apply. Thus, for example, women may perpetuate the idea that political office is conferred by inheritance, except that the line of inheritance may now include women. To some extent, then, creating reserved seats for women clearly does not mean that poor women will automatically gain access to public office. Nevertheless, the increasing election of women in successive contests does have a positive impact on legitimating the public roles of women as a whole.

Not surprisingly, women councilors in India encounter the same prejudices and lack of legitimacy as women in South Africa. They take on political burdens in addition to domestic burdens, they face male resistance and feel silenced in meetings and are made to feel ignorant (Lama-Rewal, 2001, p. 20-21; Beaman et al, 2006, p. 5). Although quotas include women in a formal sense, informal constraints may continue to exclude women from full participation. Women participate less in debates than male counterparts, even in debates that are seen to be 'women's concern', intervening far less than men in debates about public health, for example. Lama-Rewal concludes that 'the massive presence of women councilors does not seem to influence the agenda of the House: women's interventions are almost never numerous enough to influence the relative importance of the various issues discussed, and they do not intervene on what has been construed as "women's issues"' (Lama-Rewal, p. 31). Duflo et al find that when women do speak, they are more likely to receive a poor response than men speaking on the same issue (Duflo et al, p. 18). Nevertheless, they see themselves as representatives of women, and find that women are more likely to approach them with problems than they are to approach male councilors. The presence of a female *Pradhan*, or village council president, predicts greater participation of women, as well as better outcomes in terms of provision of drinking water and immunization of children (Beaman et al, 2006: 4). Yet in the case of the Calcutta municipality, this did not translate into a higher profile for women's issues in the council. With the exception of water, the other issues identified by women in her research came on the bottom of the list of the council's priorities.

The different findings of the Duflo research team and that of Lama-Rewal suggest interesting differences in the ways in which representation plays out in urban and rural settings. In India, poor women appear to have greater impact in rural settings than in South Africa, suggesting more openness than might have been expected. An overall weakness in the system is that the random allocation of reserved seats does not allow for proper relationships to be built between women representatives and constituencies. At it is designed, there is a strong incentive for women to build strong constituencies that might support them in future elections, because there is no guarantee that they will be assigned a reserved seat in the next election. However, building constituencies among women may lose them votes among men in the next election, as they may be perceived as 'special interest' representatives. Most importantly, the extent of discretionary spending capacity available to Indian *Gram Panchayats* is considerably larger than those of local councils in South Africa. This opens space for particular modes of accountability to be used, if constituencies are galvanized in that direction.

It is evident in both countries that civil society has a crucial role to play in ensuring that there is legitimacy for women political representatives. As Mukhophadhyay and Meer (2004, p.39) argue, the role of civil society is to turn 'legal entitlement into political legitimacy.' They note that while other interest groups in India (and one could add, South Africa) have

‘organised over decades to negotiate the representation of their interests with political parties, ordinary women who do not constitute an organized constituency and are newcomers to formal politics are at the mercy of political parties’ (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004, p. 40). In India, the Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA), a network of 750 organisations based in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, worked directly with women councilors to strengthen their capacity to engage the state (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004). In South Africa, the Gender Advocacy Programme (GAP) devised training and empowerment programmes to support women in local government for a number of years until their programming emphases changed (Todes et al, 2006). These kinds of training strategies provide one kind of support, empowering women councilors with the skills to read budgets, learn meeting protocols, develop confidence and deal with the media. In both countries, the training offered invaluable opportunities for networking and breaking women politicians’ sense of isolation.

The other key role of civil society – holding elected leaders accountable for their decisions and actions – is more difficult to build, especially in this early phase of formal engagement where women’s organisations are more apt to celebrate women’s new-found access to power than to criticize their embattled counterparts in the state. In South Africa, women have been the mainstay of new social movements at local level that seek to hold councilors accountable. For example, the majority of members of Durban-based organisation of homeless people, Abahlali base ‘Mjondolo are women. They have vociferously challenged the municipalities’ weak records on the delivery of services to poor people. Yet for the most part women are not mobilized as constituencies of women that challenge the state *per se*, a problem exacerbated by the close association of national leadership of the women’s movement with the government. In India, by contrast, there is a longer tradition of local level mobilization and movements for accountability than in South Africa (Heller, 2001; Goetz and Jenkins, 2001). Heller argues, convincingly, that when measured by stronger criteria of independence from political parties and willingness to challenge elected officials, civil society in South Africa is less strong than in parts of India with longer traditions of democratic practice (Heller, 2001). Although this is not a specific feature of women’s politics in India but a broader aspect of the strength of civil society, women benefited from the general political culture of demanding accountability from public officials.

In Kerala, for example, the women’s organization Sakhi has devised various strategies for enabling women to articulate their interests and to create mechanisms for ensuring accountability in development planning processes. The ‘people’s planning campaign’ in Kerala provided an important context for this kind of action, as citizens had direct oversight in relation to the use of local budgets. Yet Sakhi found that while the stipulated quota of ten percent on budgetary allocations to women was being met, there was still little attention to gender in planning and in the institutional culture of local government. While spending was directed to poor people, the projects selected did not always women’s gendered interests. Sakhi thus began to intervene directly in the planning process itself, to ensure that gender was interpreted as more than a budgetary quota. They attended village forums, contributed project ideas and where necessary conducted the research to support development plans thereby, as Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004, p. 52) say, ‘insinuating themselves into spaces that were for public officials.’ Mukhopadhyay and Meer point that this change in role of civil society from advocacy to accountability is a notable shift, and is likely to change the nature of governance in the longer term.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The central concern of this paper is to consider the ways in which constituencies of poor women might impact on policy making. The paper has outlined numerous ways in which formal access to the state, both national and local, has become more inclusive of women. However, I have argued, the consequences of increased representation have been uneven at best. In many respects, quotas have come to replace maternalism as the basis of women's access to the state but both strategies share the dilemma of contradictory outcomes: quotas may propel women into the state but often at the cost of building strong constituencies for policy change outside the state. This leaves feminists with a strategic conundrum: if radical institutional change is unlikely and incremental change so slow, what kinds of strategies ought to be adopted?

The paper demonstrates that in order to develop new strategies, a much broader lens on politics and institutions is needed. Rather than focusing solely on inclusion into institutions, the context in which institutions are located, as well as the modes of operation of institutions require analysis. Furthermore, a renewed focus on the ways in which political contestation takes place would advance our understanding of the ways in which women aggregate as a political power bloc, and on the kinds of political and policy outcomes that are possible through increased representation. These are not new questions for feminism, of course. However, debates about quotas tend to neglect the context in which quotas are adopted, and assume that the institutional conditions for effective representation are either a separate question from descriptive representation, or that these conditions can be easily built by new entrants to political structures. The latter assumption stems from perceptions that multiparty, liberal democracies are globally similar. However, as the examples cited in this paper suggest the weaknesses of party systems and of mechanisms of accountability of representatives to voters can act as a dead weight on feminist ambitions.

I argue that the overall political context in which women's organizations operate matters. In cultures where political parties are closed systems of patronage among elites and have little legitimacy among poor citizens, inclusion of women on party lists will have little impact on policy outcomes. Yet women's organizations can themselves be part of changing that culture. As the discussion of quotas in India implies, there may well be significant changes in how elected bodies operate when viewed from a longer term perspective; at least we ought to reconsider evidence with the hindsight of several elections. It is also evident that in addition to political systems, the presence and autonomy of women's organizations in civil society is a crucial determinant in equality outcomes. Where women's organizations see their interventions as going beyond inclusion to encompass accountability, their impact on those institutions are likely to be considerable. If they are successful in building accountability and shifting spending patterns, as in the Kerala example cited above, women's organizations can build trust in formal institutions; without trust it is unlikely that poor women will expend much energy in articulating interests through the state and that quotas will kick-start long-term sustained participation. Yet, we know too little about how political parties operate in new democracies and in developing country contexts, and particularly about the relationship between party elites – male and female – and grassroots members on the one hand, and between parties and women's organizations on the other. Ethnographic research into how the women's sections of political parties operate – an older area of research much debated in the era of anti-colonial nationalism but virtually ignored in contemporary feminist scholarship – could tell us volumes about the framing of women's political demands inside political parties. Deeper research is also clearly needed on how parties recruit members and structure the

relationship between members and leaders; in particular, we need more research on the gendered aspects of these processes.

Political parties are not always the primary location of representational authority. In many African contexts, other institutions such as traditional authorities continue to thrive well into the phase of formal liberal democracy. This is certainly true for rural women in South Africa, who may find the authority of traditional leaders difficult to supplant, particularly in a context in which there are few vehicles for collective action. In contexts where political parties may be relatively decentred as vehicles of representation, such as in the Indian *panchayat* system, informal codes of respect, legitimacy and entitlement may combine to limit the extent to which representatives are accountable to poor women. Informal networks of authority are notoriously difficult to change, and their persistence reinforces rather than contradicts the need for well-institutionalised and democratic political parties. Where processes of accountability to party members become routinised, the possibilities for women to make gender equality and enforceable component of electoral and policy mandates is strengthened.

Women's demands for inclusion are not only demands for more democratic representational outcomes; they have the potential effect of democratizing the system as a whole. Yet such an effect does not automatically follow from increases in the numbers of women in the state. They are most likely where women are organized outside the state. It is evident from the examples cited in the paper and particularly from the case study of South Africa that women's presence in the state is insufficient to redirect public resources to policies that change the condition of women's lives. Mobilisation – and contention- outside the state is the decisive factor, as the Indian example so ably demonstrates. Although there are a plethora of important policy and legal changes that establish formal equality between women and men, or that direct resources towards improving women's capabilities to fulfil their gendered domestic responsibilities more effectively, contentious politics is necessary to advance interests that challenge existing power relations of gender. This suggests the importance of research on policy processes that examine the interaction and contestation between state actors, political parties and women's organizations in advancing claims. Detailed examinations of specific policies offer the opportunity for a proper attention to context; it opens questions about the nature and capacities of institutions as they operate in practice that might move scholarship beyond generalized assumptions.

Finally, does the sphere of women's activism in the state matter? In part because of disillusionment with national gender machineries and parliaments, decentralization is posed as a more women-friendly approach to public decision-making. Yet, as the discussion of India and South Africa shows, many of the constraints on women's participation and effectiveness at the national level also operate at the local level. Indeed, it could be argued that patriarchal discourses are more strongly defended by local elite than by 'modernising' national actors (Beall, 2006). Moreover, decentralization that offers limited opportunities for control of resources (for example, in South Africa) is not likely to produce greater responsiveness and accountability to poor women.

These points underscore the central argument in this paper that pro-equality outcomes for women are determined to an over-riding extent by the underlying degree of political democratization in the society as a whole. That is, the extent to which political parties and electoral systems are institutionalised and legitimate, the extent to which poor citizens as a whole trust the system (itself a product of the extent to which governments are responsive to the needs and interests of poor people) and the existence of strong and relatively autonomous

women's movements. Quotas are a starting point for this deeper democratization; they are not the outcomes of struggles for democracy.

It is evident that there is a wide variety of ways in which women have formed constituencies and built alliances to press for their demands. In sum, existing research on the politics of gender equality offers the following key findings:

1. There is a lag effect between rising levels of economic growth and women's labour force participation on the one hand and women's participation in the public sphere on the other. This point was raised in section 2
2. Competitive electoral systems create opportunities for women's organizations to insert their claims on processes of public deliberation, by leveraging differences between political parties. However,
3. Women's movements are more likely to make policy gains when they align with political parties on the left and with other social movements.
4. Strategies based on engaging the state work best when women's organizations build and sustain constituencies outside of the state.
5. Transitions to liberal democracy may inscribe gender equality into official rhetoric. This can open opportunities for women to translate formal rights into de facto rights.
6. Liberal rights are a necessary but not sufficient condition for gender equality. The openness of the political system to oppositional mobilization and associational autonomy are vital factors that determine the extent to which women's organizations can form and thrive, and be seen as legitimate representatives of the interests of different groups of women. Women's local organizations that drew on rich networks of associations at community level, not only among women but also between women and men, are at the core of successful collective action.
7. The presence and activism of women's movements is not enough to guarantee attention to women's needs and interests in the public sphere. Feminist involvement in women's movements and political parties is key to advancing substantive representation of poor women.
8. The overall degree of political institutionalisation is crucial: women's movements representing poor women are unlikely to be successful in using access to the public sphere when states and associated institutions such as political parties are poorly institutionalised. Governing institutions and
9. Political party systems shape strategies and outcomes of all political actors, including women's movements. State capacity to intervene in society – not only geographically (rural as well as urban) but also into the 'community' - is a central determinant of the successful translation of gender rights into equality outcomes.

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