



Realizing Their Needs

Women's Access to Public Services in Sector Decentralization

According to its advocates, sectoral decentralization reforms can make water management, health, education, local economic development, and other public functions more efficient, responsive, and accountable to citizens. Citizen participation in the user groups and local management committees that often accompany decentralization is also intended to spill over into broader processes of empowerment. Marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and the poor are especially supposed to benefit.

Since 2004, 13 research projects supported in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America by the Women's Rights and Citizenship program of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) have been exploring exactly how decentralization affects women's access to services, resources, and local power. The findings show that these reforms do not automatically benefit women, and can even put them at a disadvantage.



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afford, to fund education and health care. With female illiteracy at nearly 50% — compared to about 30% for men — and girls lagging behind boys in school enrolment, the consequences are devastating. The situation is particularly bleak in some parts of the country: southern Sudan, for instance, has the lowest ratio of female to male primary school enrolment in the world.

In health, said one woman in Red Sea State, “those who cannot afford user fees...cannot access good health care.” Nor are the limited services tailored to local needs, least of all women's needs. In many areas of Red Sea State, for instance, researchers found there were no female doctors. As a result, women from conservative families “do not access care, because they do not want to see male doctors.” In a country with one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, this can be catastrophic.

Efficiency vs. democracy

As in Sudan, sector decentralization has also led to the introduction of user fees in other countries. In fact, it is often implemented mainly in the hope of making service delivery more efficient through cost recovery. Several of the IDRC-supported research projects demonstrate that the emphasis on efficiency can override the democratic possibilities of decentralization.

Water sector reforms undertaken in the Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra are a good example. These

Women pay the price for scarce resources

In Sudan, decentralization was mandated under the country's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreements. On paper, it was designed to promote democracy and local autonomy. In practice, however, the central government retains tight control over budgets and decision-making and has failed to support subnational tiers in carrying out their new responsibilities.

Asha El-Karib, a founding member of the Gender Center for Research and Training in Sudan, led a project on women's access to health, education, and natural and financial resources in the wake of decentralization. El-Karib and her colleagues found that turning aspects of health and education over to subnational tiers of government has had a “limited if not negative impact on women's access to services.”

In Sudan, “fiscal decentralization,” according to the research team, “is understood as: ‘each state has to find its own resources.’” As a result, local authorities have turned to user fees, which poor families often cannot



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In health, said one woman in Red Sea State, “those who cannot afford user fees...cannot access good health care.”

reforms created local drinking water and irrigation committees. Women’s representation in these new institutions reflects their crucial roles in household water collection, use, and management — although their roles are less well recognized in irrigation. Women collect tariffs, organize maintenance, and take part in decisions about where to locate new infrastructure. Researchers noted that women, in effect, become mere administrators of projects designed at higher levels. Although women’s participation contributes to smoother-running projects, it does not permit them to question the overall policy model, based on cost-recovery.

Researchers in Paraguay also noted the limited scope of users’ influence in the health decentralization reforms they studied. These reforms gave some local governments, in coordination with local clinics and citizens’ health councils, responsibility for designing and managing programs in certain areas. But although the health councils gave women and others opportunities to voice local health priorities, the centrally determined cost-recovery model was not open to democratic input. User fees, which place the greatest burden on poor women, were the only option given to local providers to finance health services.

Controlling budgets

Findings from El Salvador, Honduras, India, Pakistan, and South Africa all showed that women rarely sit on budget or finance committees in local government, and find it difficult to gain access to financial information. But unless women influence budgets and funds are set aside to meet their needs, electing women councillors or promoting women’s participation in local committees is unlikely to lead to allocation decisions that promote women’s and girls’ equal access to water, health, education, and other public services.

Such findings led the IDRC-supported project teams to advocate rules for ensuring that budget funds are

allocated for women’s needs in general programs and projects, as well as programs and projects specifically for women. Such gender criteria should also be part of budget monitoring and audits. The researchers say it is essential for women to participate in decentralized bodies where budget decisions are made.

Constraints on women

Even when women have access to decentralized institutions, numerous factors can undermine their influence. In Nepal, local education committees, irrigation user groups, and community forestry user groups must all include women, by law. But women are often reluctant to raise their voices when men are present, and men are often unwilling to listen to them. The project team in Nepal did note, however, that women spoke up more in women-only groups.

One Nepalese woman described her role in a decentralized community school management committee this way: “We remain silent throughout the meeting, as we are not able to speak in front of respected male members of the village. Rather, we put our signature on the minutes and leave for home.” There is little sense from men or women that women have a right to be included, or that they can make positive contributions to improving management or service delivery.

Women are not all the same

Researchers in Nepal also discovered that in several communities the same elite women filled quotas on numerous local committees, thus blocking access to women of lower status. This finding highlights the crucial fact that while state policies often treat women as a homogeneous category, in reality, their differing class, caste, race, ethnic, age, and other identities shape their access to decision-making, services, and resources.



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Moreover, the research team studying water sector decentralization in Maharashtra and Gujarat found that even when lower-caste and poor women were present in meetings, they usually had less influence than higher-caste and wealthier women over such decisions as where to build water infrastructure, or whether to switch from public to private water connections. Local irrigation user groups in Maharashtra also exclude community members who do not own land, leaving women and many of the poorest families out of decision-making over this crucial resource.

In Ecuador, women faced obstacles related to racial and class discrimination. In the municipality of Cayambe, IDRC-supported researchers learned that attempts to establish local user groups for a maternal health program had failed “because doctors and nurses rejected the participation of indigenous and rural women, claiming that they needed professional training in order to take part.”



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Reflecting local gender cultures

Irrigation engineer Zulema Gutierrez and sociologist Marina Arratia led a team exploring decentralization, gender, and water rights in Bolivia, a multicultural country whose 35 different Indigenous cultures make up 71% of the total population. Decentralization reforms in Bolivia recognize traditional authorities and cultural practices, but the researchers found that cultural dimensions of Indigenous peoples' perspectives on water are not reflected in the design and monitoring of local irrigation projects.

Local people have differing views of water rights and resources, ranging from individual approaches to nature-centred communal approaches that see natural resources as shared. Project design, however, assumes individual rights to water. Researchers reported that identical “operations and maintenance manuals and regulations are used without distinction across different irrigation systems.” The emphasis on individual rights undermines communal practices and excludes some of the poorest families, including families headed by women.

The individual rights framework is also linked to a standard view of gender relations that does not tally with communal traditions. Project technicians often fail to understand the actual roles of women in their communities and families, and hence do not collect

information about women's specific needs. In one community, for example, women wanted water reservoirs included in the irrigation works, but their preference went unheard.

A role for central government

The principle of subsidiarity — placing functions and powers in the hands of the lowest possible level of government, or as close as possible to citizens — is at the heart of decentralization. But the research projects suggest that in some countries central governments have more capacity, resources, and political will than local governments to ensure that women's rights are protected and promoted through decentralization.

This was illustrated clearly in South Africa where urban planner Alison Todes and her colleagues found that national gender policies, funding earmarked for women's needs, and national government requirements on women's participation in local projects helped women gain access to resources and projects. They concluded that central government intervention explained local women's participation in drinking water, small business, and other local projects, while conservative local cultures posed obstacles to women's participation.

Research findings in Benin, by contrast, illustrate what can happen when the central government does not intervene. Agricultural economist Pascaline Babadankpodji and her team examined local agricultural planning in a region where climate change is intensifying competition over land. They learned that although women farmers contribute substantially to the local economy, their farming role is not recognized, their access to land is precarious, they have little influence over planning, and they receive little technical support.

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Topping the list of women's concerns were prejudices against their involvement in the public sphere and lack of confidence in their capacity to participate in public discussions. But the main problem, researchers concluded, is that national gender policies are poorly linked to planning and projects at the local level.

Make gender equity the goal

Despite finding that women face multiple obstacles in influencing decisions and gaining access to services and resources in decentralized sectors, the 13 IDRC-supported research projects did reveal some encouraging stories. For example, despite limitations, many women in local drinking water committees in Gujarat and Maharashtra told researchers they were happy with the opportunities decentralization gave them to participate in the public sphere and help their communities.

In Ecuador, women in municipalities led by left-of-centre and Indigenous parties also benefited following decentralization. Researchers documented the creation of a program on women's sexual and reproductive health that linked Western and traditional medicine, raised the status of midwives and healers, and achieved zero maternal mortality in the municipality of Cotacachi. They also learned about successful literacy programs for rural women, new income-generating projects, and an innovative, intercultural effort to combat violence against women.

The main lesson, however, is that for decentralization to benefit and empower women, it must be designed with their particular needs and situations in mind. National and local government policymakers and bureaucrats, as well as civil society organizations, must be committed to ensuring that women play an active role in decentralized systems, and that locally managed services and resources promote gender equity.

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Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is one of the world's leading institutions in the generation and application of new knowledge to meet the challenges of international development. For nearly 40 years, IDRC has worked in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

The Women's Rights and Citizenship program supports applied research in the field of women's rights, citizenship, and development. It thus contributes to bringing Southern voices into current debates in the international gender and development field.

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