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INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL

Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels

Written statement*

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I. Introduction

In this presentation, I aim to discuss women's progress with regard to political participation and decision-making at the local level. I shall explore the ways in which decentralized governance has facilitated – or not – women's access to political participation. My presentation is based on the findings of researchers supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), papers commissioned by IDRC which were prepared by Melissa Maclean and Jo Beall, as well as the policy recommendations from an International Conference on “Decentralization, Local Power and Women's Rights” held in Mexico City on 18-21 November 2008 by IDRC in collaboration with the Government of Mexico and in co-operation with a number of international agencies.

Much of the enthusiasm for decentralization and for enhancing the powers and responsibilities of local units of government is based on the idea that they are closer to the people that the state is supposed to serve. From such arguments it is often assumed that the global trend towards the decentralization of public services, resources and decision-making is also good for women.

The logic is as follows: prevailing gender relations in most parts of the world see women as being responsible for the domestic sphere, and thus women are more likely to be concerned with things homebound and local. As such, decentralization is often expected to increase women's participation and representation in local decision-making, and advance women's rights. The reality, however, is not so clear-cut.

First, localization has its limits and there is reason to believe that effective voice and distributive policies are better exercised at national level. Second, even where the benefits of decentralization can be clearly demonstrated, it is not guaranteed that these are extended to women. Third, ‘women’ are a heterogeneous constituency and even where decentralization advances gender equality, it is not necessarily extended to all categories of women with similar effect. Since 2004, 13 research teams in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, supported by the Women's Rights and Citizenship program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), have been interrogating these claims. In this presentation, I shall share highlights of the research findings from the different regions. I shall also explore some good practices and lessons learned, based on strategies that have actually increased women's participation in decision-making processes at the local level. And finally, I shall offer some reflections on the importance of connecting the global, the national and local levels to increase women's political participation in decision-making processes.

II. Background

Over the last two decades, decentralization has been changing government around the world. Reforms have granted sub-national authorities such as municipalities more autonomy and responsibility in areas that include water and sanitation, health, education, and local economic development. Often, these reforms are linked to new forms of political representation and participation—local elections, participatory budgeting, village development committees, and citizen oversight mechanisms—which are intended to make local government more accessible, accountable, and responsive.

Decentralization reforms are promoted as a means of deepening democracy and improving development. However, these processes have not been sufficiently gender sensitive, thus negating governments' global commitments and obligations, inter alia the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and relevant regional instruments that reaffirm gender equality, including women's full and equal participation and representation in public life.

IDRC has supported research projects on "Decentralization and Women's Rights" which were as diverse as the researchers and the places where they were carried out. University-based researchers in South Africa, civil society activists in India, and a former municipal councillor in El Salvador were among the researchers selected for IDRC support. The diversity of decentralization reforms and contexts makes having detailed studies on local experiences especially important. However, some experiences turned out to be widely shared.

III. Does decentralization foster women's participation in decision making processes?

Some decentralization experts and women's rights

In Ecuador, in four small municipalities led by left-of-centre and indigenous parties intent on promoting local participatory democracy, researchers found that women had made significant inroads in getting into local office and ensuring their participation in local planning. The Ecuador case illustrated what can be accomplished when a political party open to gender equity is in power. But in the town of Nabón, which had several woman councillors and a woman mayor, councillor Magali Quezada told researchers that she and others, when dealing with men, had to “speak loudly and put up with their jokes. They resisted having a woman in charge.”

The research carried out by UNNATI, an NGO in Rajasthan, India, looked at factors that help or hinder women’s participation in local government. The research team asked women councillors what kind of training they needed to become better advocates for women’s needs and rights. The councillors, many of whom have little formal education, said they wanted training sessions that are frequent, short, and conducted in local languages. They also

according to Kristen Sample, in Latin America in recent years there has been an increase in both the number and percentage of women in politics - embodied by the rise to power of two female presidents, Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Cristina Fernandez in Argentina. Their election has, in turn, generated a renewed debate on the state of women in politics today in the region. The reality, perhaps surprising, is that the progress of women in assuming elected office in Latin America varies considerably: between and even within countries, nationally and sub-nationally. Nevertheless with 21 per cent of women sitting in national parliaments the region has one of the highest rates of women parliamentarians in the world.

Moreover, in the region new global leaderships have had an impact on women's movements. Today, Latin American feminists frequently point to Spain as an example of how comprehensive government commitment can help close the gender-gap. Spain's Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, a self-proclaimed "feminist", is doing more than talking the talk. Under his leadership, Spain has promoted parity in the cabinet (nine women to eight men), electoral lists and corporate boards. Just as importantly, the Zapatero government has moved beyond these legislative measures to affect cultural norms and mores, as evidenced by the public-service announcements aimed at ending domestic violence and at reminding men of their responsibility to do an equal share of housework.

VII. Policy Recommendations

Finally, it is important to highlight the policy recommendations that emerged from an international conference on "Decentralization, Local Power and Women's Rights", held by IDRC and the Government of Mexico in Mexico City in November 2008. These recommendations bring a women's rights and gender equality perspective to the global agenda on participation in decision-making processes at the local level.

The policy recommendations include the following:

- Implement mechanisms to raise women's awareness of their democratic rights so that they can exercise them through thoughtful, independent and strategic use of the ballot to effect change.
- National and sub-national governments to introduce or expand quotas and reservations for women in all institutions of decentralized governance, including local bureaucracies, and implement mechanisms to ensure women's active and effective presence in leadership roles within them.
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