



Voice and Women's Empowerment: Mapping a Research Agenda

Anne-Marie Goetz and Celestine Nyamu Musembi

The number of women in public office is an inadequate proxy for assessing 'women's political voice' in public decision making as it is based on the assumption that female public officials will - by virtue of their gender - seek to promote women's rights and gender specific issues. This Policy Brief seeks to explain how a critical analysis of the concept of 'representation' can help researchers understand the reasons why numbers alone is not enough to ensure an amplification of women's public voice and substantive transformation of policy.

Representation can be understood in terms of 'formalistic' and 'substantive' representation (Pitkin 1967). In a formal understanding of representation members of a political constituency authorise a representative to pursue their interests and this representative is accountable to the constituency as he or she must justify his or her actions and can be voted out for poor performance. However, the idea of the 'constituency' behind this is problematic



Photo: Sheikh Rajibul Islam

in the case of women, or voters interested in gender equality. People voting for gender equality, or people supporting a feminist candidate, are not necessarily clustered in a territorially demar-

cated voting constituency – yet in most electoral systems, representatives are selected to represent a territorially defined constituency, not an ideologically defined one.



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(Mala Htun 2004) examines the system of reserving 30 per cent of local council seats in India for women and also for excluded castes and tribes. She argues forcefully that this reserved seat system works well for excluded groups that are geographically concentrated and have clear group interests. For women, who are neither geographically concentrated nor concentrated in any particular class, caste or ethnic category, the physical reservation of seats is less effective as women's interests are not shaped so much by gender as by a range of other identifications and experiences.'

'Substantive' representation is equally problematic and based on the idea that women, by virtue of the fact that they are women, can 'stand for' and instrumentally 'act for' women. Can this focus on substantive representation be associ-

ated with some of the effects of identity politics that are detrimental for democratic participation? In contexts where the very purpose of political engagement has become associated with cornering jobs and financial opportunities for one's own social group, is the focus on women in politics contributing to the erosion of the representative function by expecting that women in office will bring rewards for women?

The remaining justification for a focus on increasing the number of women in public office is that it is a conveniently simple proxy measure for assessing the level of women's 'voice' in decision making. Whilst such a measure is useful, and perhaps necessary, it is not sufficient if our aim is to understand how to make institutions more accountable and responsive to women.

We need a realistic assessment of what quotas are able to achieve in a context where politics is patronage-based or



where it is organised around ethnicity. In undertaking such an assessment our focus might be directed away from formal representation and towards building women's engagement in the non-formal institutions for public deliberation, the political parties,

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civil society groups, and media associations that mould public opinion and shape interests.

civil society organisations;

Women's political influence as a gender will eventually be measurable through improved access to services and more secure rights – particularly rights to physical security within and outside the home. Understanding how women articulate and aggregate their interests, how they try to shape public decision-making, and the degree to which such actions make a difference in women's lives, is essential if we are to move past the numbers and keep our focus on the goal of substantive policy change.



In such non-formal arenas alternative measures of 'voice' emerge, for example:

- Women's voting rate as compared to men
- The number of women's organisations, the networks between them and the resources they command relative to other

- The proportion of women's organisations adhering to the basic principles of women's rights;
- The nature and frequency of contact between women's organisations and women in politics and their male allies.

References

Htun, M (2004), 'Is Gender Like Ethnicity? The Political Representation of Identity Groups', *Perspectives on Politics*, 2.3:439

Pitkin, H (1967), *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press





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About us

Pathways of Women's Empowerment is an international research consortium funded by the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID). Co-ordinated by the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, UK, the consortium is collectively run by six partners: BRAC University, Bangladesh; the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA), Ghana; Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; the Nucleus for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies (NEIM) at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; the Social Research Centre (SRC) at the American University in Cairo; and UNIFEM, who in turn work with partners within their regions. Our research seeks to ground emerging understandings of empowerment in women's everyday lives, trace the trajectories of policies affecting women's empowerment and explore promising stories of change to find out what works and why to advance gender justice and equality for all.



Contact:

Pathways of Women's Empowerment RPC, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton,
East Sussex, BN1 9RE, UK

E-mail: Pathways@ids.ac.uk

Tel: + 44 (0) 1273 678490

Website: www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/

Fax: + 44 (0) 1273 621202

Credits

This brief was summarised by Nardia Simpson.

For further reading see: Anne-Marie Goetz and Celestine Nyamu Musembi, **Voice and Women's Empowerment: Mapping a Research Agenda** Pathways Working Paper 2. This can be viewed at: www.pathways-of-empowerment.org/resources_pathways.html

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