Gender Inequities in India's Urban Governance

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Abstract: *Cities are historically known as centres of politics, economic opportunities, innovation and socio-cultural exchange. They are also physical manifestations of asymmetric power relationships deeply embedded in urban society, in which gender stands as a key dimension of exclusion and inequity. The aim of this research is to theoretically and empirically understand the state of women participation and the intermittent challenges for gender mainstreaming, with India's urban governance as the case in point. The paper underpins that although numeric presence is necessary, it can certainly not be a sufficient condition for women's full, equal and informed participation in political, social and economic decision-making. The study finds specific gender roles and major challenges that affect women to effectively participate in city management. This country assessment of women participation in urban local bodies builds a compelling case in favour of their capacity building towards sustainable urban development.*

Keywords: Gender, Inequity, Urban Governance, Representation, Participation

1. Introduction

Women across the globe constitute half the citizenry, yet they continue to stand as the 'largest excluded category' representing a disproportionately large share of the world's poor (UNDP 2014). Denial of access to the formal political domain further relegates them to the periphery. The Global Gender Gap report (2014) focuses on the persisting gender gap divides across and within regions. In view of the growing chasm, the last few decades witness an overwhelming global concern and solidarity for empowerment of women following with a series of initiatives led by the United Nations in this direction. While promotion of gender equality featured as one of the laudable goals in the UN Millennium Project, the checkered progress made so far re-designates it as a priority area in the post-2015 sustainable development agenda of the UN.

Cities are historically known as centres of politics, economic opportunities, innovation and socio-cultural exchange. They are also physical manifestations of asymmetric power relationships deeply embedded in urban society. Gender stands as a key dimension of diversity, inequality and power structures in the city which impinge on the social relations. Women and men (having varying priorities in terms of services and infrastructure) can influence, participate in and benefit from urban governance in diverse ways. The discursive gender construction pervades diverse aspects in urban areas (Sethi 2012), including their participation in urban governance, refer Figure 1. The variations mainly arising from their physiological differences, socio-culturally ascribed roles severely restrict women's access to the social, economic and political resources of the city (Beall 1996). As inhabitants of the civic space, although women's livelihood activities have a significant bearing on the communities' social and economic well-being in urban areas, yet they largely remain unrecognized or unsupported. Under-representation of women in civic bodies limits their ability to influence local decisions, impacting provisioning and prioritization of basic services, allocation of resources and quality of life. Evidence shows that women make up only 9% of mayors and 21% of councillors in the world (Women Watch: Gender Equality and Sustainable Urbanization Fact sheet) Compelled to stay excluded from the realm of public decision-making, their voices remain unheard rendering them weak and powerless in the face of poverty, insecurity and discrimination. Consequently, as a social category, women continue to be the worst victims of deplorable living conditions and poor access to the basic urban services.
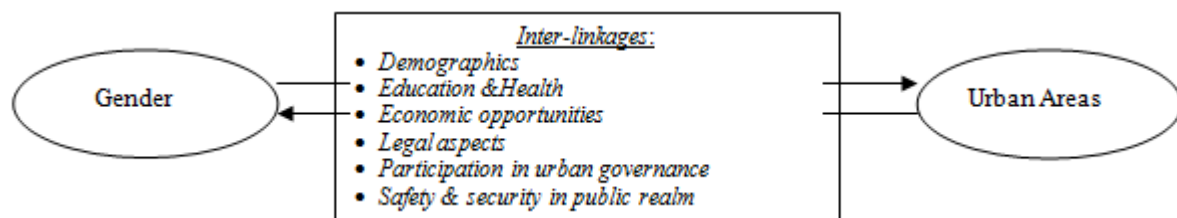

Figure 1: Inter-linkages of gender aspects in urban areas. Source: Authors, based on Sethi 2012

Promotion of gender equality in the use and benefits of urban space and institutions is conceived as an essential pre-condition to ensure sustainability of such initiatives. It is thus an imperative, as a necessary first step, to devise well-designed and constructive gender mainstreaming strategy to curb reinforcement of gender stereotypes in the everyday practices of urban governance. Discernibly, there is a clear shift in focus from granting of equal opportunities (gender balance) to even, impartial and dialectical treatment of the needs of both men and women (gender equity). In this pursuit, the precise research objectives and methodology is explained in section 2. The normative aspects of this dynamic on mainstreaming gender in urban governance are discussed in section 3, while the state of gender representation in Indian cities is presented in section 4. This is followed by a discussion in section 5 on gender roles and

Paper ID: SUB157511

1069

intermittent challenges in mainstreaming women in local governance, and it heavily draws from recent work in this area notably Sen 2015. The last section concludes with research and policy application of this study.

2. Research Intent and Methodology

The aim of this research is to theoretically and empirically understand the state of women participation in the realm of urban governance and the intermittent challenges for gender mainstreaming evident in this path. With India as the case in point, the study examines this with the following discernible objectives-
1) To review the theoretical discourse on mainstreaming gender in urban governance
2) To evaluate the country-wide gender inequity in city governance, legislation and performance.
3) To identify gender roles and understand the challenges in mainstreaming of women in local governance

The study proposes to make a thorough and extensive review of the existing theoretical literature and public policy documents on the theme. The research design will employ both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, depending upon the specific objective. In pursuit of objective 1, literature study will be conducted on relevant theories. The second objective shall entail a detailed study of government policies and the application of quantitative techniques to support the empirical assessment of women participation levels in Indian governance. In pursuit of objective 3, qualitative methodologies like findings from case studies of state/ city-wide best practices engendering governance, structured interviews with experts, municipal councillors, etc. will assist in deeper understanding of gender roles, practical issues, possibilities and constraints in realizing women responsive urban governance. In order to capture country-wide variations of gender participation in city-level governance, the study will rely on a mix of classified data and secondary sources of information like published books, monographs, research papers, study reports documenting city-specific interventions and good practices across states.

3. Mainstreaming Gender in Urban Governance

As sites and symbols of innovations, progress and prosperity cities are more amenable to addressing gender concerns in a just and equitable manner. Socially established norms and values tend to change more quickly in urban environments, which can narrow gender gaps in education, healthcare, provide increased legal protections against violence and exploitation, and expand opportunities for women to engage in the formal economy. However, given the sheer scale and pace of urbanization in present times and the distortions therein the transformative potential of cities remains largely untapped. Rapid urban transformation across the developing world and high degree of informality that persists, presently outstrips the capacity of cities to provide for adequate infrastructure and basic services for their citizens leading to rising proportions of urban poor, a chunk of which happen to be women. Unavailability of enabling infrastructures like street lighting, public toilets, transport and affordable housing severely constricts women's accessibility to urban space. Furthermore, proliferation of slums, growth of informal sector, increasing casualisation and under-employment, lack of education and healthcare facilities accentuates their vulnerability.

Mainstreaming gender in urban governance includes the study of representation, access and control, roles in decision-making and exercise of power & authority. While the prevalent discourse under the influence of liberal political theorists advocated group-based representation in the form of quotas for 'women', as a single homogenous category, more recent theorization of gender in the context of urban governance visualizes 'women' not as 'neutral de-contextualized citizens'. There is a growing trend towards recognition of multiple social structures (such as gender, caste, class, age, disability, etc) which often intersect to condition the form and extent of privilege and oppression. In a specific urban context, therefore, gender mainstreaming must accommodate diversities within the group of women and their variegated experiences of city life (Zebracki 2014, Garry 2011, Hughes 2011).

As a transformative strategy 'mainstreaming' presupposes that gender considerations are routinely incorporated in the assessment of urban policy issues, options and impacts which is a continuous process (UN 2002). Absence of women from the local decision-making structures disable them from fixing policy priorities and addressing structural fault lines in service provisioning to build equitable cities (ADB 2013). In addition, building safe and socially inclusive cities for women is a vital component in the evolving agenda of good urban governance. With the urbanization in swift swing particularly in the developing countries in the 21st century (UNDESA 2012/ 2007), city governments have emerged as powerful constituents in the schema of decentralized governance which has the potential of bringing development decisions closer to the community and to reach out to the marginalized. Their direct links with the citizens enable them to identify and address gender-based discriminations and accordingly allocate financial resources to gender-specific programmes, policies and interventions that can best address and eliminate these inequalities (World Bank 2012).

Provisions within the Constitution of India to protect women rights

Article 14 : Right to Equality

Article 15 : Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth

Article 15(3) : State is permitted to make any special provision for women and children

Article 16 : Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment

Article 21 : Protection of life and personal liberty (Right to Life)

Article 39 : Certain principles of policy to be followed by the State—The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing— **(a)** that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Equal Right to Means of Livelihood)

Article 42 : Provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief

Article 51(A)(e) : Fundamental duty of the State to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women

Figure 2

Urban local bodies (ULBs) form the closest and most accessible launching pad for women to be involved in governance thereby making governance structures and processes more just, equitable, inclusive and accountable. UNU-Wider draws on the findings of a multi-country research programme, Pathways for Women Empowerment and narrates a series of stories of 'what works' that illustrate local dynamics and dimensions of change (Cornwall 2014). Translating national objectives into locally-relevant ones gives urban governments an opportunity to identify specific development priorities of women at the grassroots and to develop policies that best respond to gender differences and hierarchies. Clearly, in the context of urban governance, gender mainstreaming strategy to be meaningful calls for greater representation of women in political spaces.

4. State of Gender Representation in Indian Cities

Protection of women rights and support to empower them has been duly acknowledged by the international community. Right from the incipient stage, the United Nations has focused on promotion of human rights, elimination of discrimination and violence against women. The global spirit has reasonably found resonance in the national doctrines. The Constitution of India offers wholesome protection to women rights (Figure 2). It treats them equal to men in all matters through right to life, equality, prohibition of discrimination and also enshrines it as a fundamental duty of the State.

The aspect of women becoming elected representative is also recorded at all the three levels (refer Table 1). While India has a good record of women holding all the important posts in the country, the overall participation of women in politics is not very satisfactory. As per the provisions of Article 243 D of the Constitution, one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in Panchayats (local self-Government) at all levels and also those of the Chairpersons are reserved for women. Even some States like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tripura and Uttarakhand have legislated for 50% reservation for women. As a result of this initiative, out of about 28 lakh elected members in Panchayats, around 10 lakh are women.

Meanwhile, the presence of women in India's ULBs (includes town councils, municipal councils, municipal corporations, etc.) has for long been minimal and gender concerns seldom featured in the urban development policies. Despite being major users of urban space and services, their engagement in civic affairs is relatively new. The enactment of the Seventy-Fourth Constitution Amendment Act (74th CAA) in 1992 by the Parliament was a landmark legislation sought to promote decentralization, civic engagement including women access to and enhanced participation in ULBs. Besides mandating reservation of one-third of elected seats for women in the ULBs, the Act extended the same principle of reservation for women belonging to backward sections of the society. As instruments of planning for socio-economic development and social justice, the functional mandate of the ULBs in India encompasses a host of development concerns such as roads, water supply, public health, sanitation, transportation and devising & delivery of social welfare schemes and identification of the target beneficiaries for these. By the very nature, these have important implications for meeting a number of women's practical needs. Thus as women move into leadership positions in the local bodies, gender issues are likely to receive a greater impetus.

Empirical literature on efficacy of 74th CAA and internalization of women issues in cities offers a diverging and confounding viewpoint. While SARC (2010) suggests that women elected to ULBs have performed very creditably resulting in their empowerment, the SCUD (2010), Lal & Kumar (2007) and Prasad (2014) have noted that despite increased women representation, their expected empowerment and participation in decision making process has not fully materialized. Meanwhile UNDP (2009), Prasad (2014), Sen (2015) have made attempts to identify intermediate issues in enhancing specific roles in gender responsive urban governance in India.

Table I.

State	LokSabha	Vidhan Sabha	Panchayat
Andhra Pradesh	7.00%	8.16%	33.46%
Assam	14.29%	11.90%	36.89%
Bihar	7.50%	14.81%	50.00%
Chhatisgarh	9.09%	11.11%	54.50%
Goa	0.00%	2.50%	32.33%
Gujarat	15.38%	6.59%	33.02%
Haryana	0.00%	10.00%	36.50%
Himachal Pradesh	0.00%	4.41%	50.11%
Jammu & Kashmir	16.67%	3.45%	0.00%
Jharkhand	0.00%	9.88%	58.56%
Karnataka	3.57%	1.33%	43.62%
Kerala	5.00%	5.00%	51.85%
Madhya Pradesh	17.24%	13.48%	50.47%
Maharashtra	10.42%	3.82%	49.93%
Odisha	9.52%	4.76%	0.00%
Punjab	7.69%	11.97%	34.93%
Rajasthan	4.00%	14.00%	50.00%
Tamil Nadu	10.26%	7.26%	35.00%
Tripura	0.00%	8.33%	36.01%
Uttar Pradesh	16.25%	8.93%	39.99%
Uttarakhand	20.00%	7.14%	56.13%
West Bengal	28.57%	11.56%	38.43%

5. Gender Roles and Challenges

The nature and scope of municipal functions under the 74th CAA, the Twelfth Schedule offer a vital clue to understand the expected roles and responsibilities of municipal councillors. Accordingly, municipal councillors are expected to shoulder a host of responsibilities concerning almost every major aspect of municipal governance ranging from decision-making and their implementation, provisioning of civic amenities and services, undertaking development initiatives, ensuring augmentation and optimum utilization of local resources and so on (Sen 2015). As custodian of municipal powers, both legislative and administrative, the local councillors collectively set the vision and direction of municipal governance. More precisely, a municipal councillor is required to fulfill the following key mandates:

1) Community Representation: Effective representation requires that the councillor knows and understands the interests of the residents in their respective constituencies. They serve as an essential communication link between the local government and the citizens. This calls for regular consultation with the local residents and ensuring that they are kept informed of council decisions and progress of municipal work.
2) Municipal Leadership: As members of the council, the councillors are required to arrive at policy decisions by attending the council meetings and participating in the discussions therein. This includes providing guidance to municipal officials, asking for periodic reports and ensuring that they follow procedure and are held accountable for their actions.
3) Urban Planning: As per the constitutional stipulations, the urban planning process is supposed to be driven primarily by the councillors. The constitutionally mandated Ward Committees led by the ward councillor stand as potential participatory mechanisms whereby local communities assemble to deliberate on development priorities, resource allocations, infrastructural gaps, deficiencies in service delivery, etc.
4) Management of Public Finances: As custodians of public finances, the councillors need to oversee financial management system of the municipalities for ensuring transparency, accountability and professionalism in management of municipal finance. Based on assessment of community needs by councillors, the task of drawing up and approval of municipal budget is undertaken by the council. Effective revenue collection especially entails to mobilize the larger community for this purpose.

The functional mandate of the ULBs in India encompasses a host of development concerns such as water, sanitation, transportation and devising and delivery of social welfare schemes and identification of the target beneficiaries for these. By the very nature, these have important implications for meeting a number of women's practical needs. Thus as women move into leadership positions in the local bodies, gender issues are likely to receive a greater impetus. Women representatives having better contact with the grassroots are expected to share a deeper understanding of the specific needs and issues concerning women and children in their localities. The multiple functions to be performed by them demand expertise, insights and sound knowledge about the local government system and municipal environment. An efficacious discharge of municipal responsibilities thus calls for capacitating and skill development of the municipal councillors and functionaries. Councillors require an in-depth understanding of their roles and responsibilities that could guide them in their role performance. Rising level of expectations of the community they serve, competing interests among the different groups of citizens living in the municipality, limited human, material and financial resources and tight timelines for delivery of services are some of the complex challenges that councillors face on an everyday basis (Sen 2015).

In consideration of the graveness of the situation, the High Powered Expert Committee for Estimating the Investment Requirements for Urban Infrastructure and Services aptly urges the need for a concerted effort in strengthening the capacity of local government institutions and its members to ensure quick and improved delivery, on the one hand, and to implement urban sector reforms, on the other. The struggle is even harder for the elected women representatives who have made their way into the public realm merely by virtue of the reservation provision. An overwhelming majority of them being new entrants in municipal governance and management of service delivery are relatively inexperienced having no previous exposure to the structures and processes of municipal governance and administration. Besides lack of required knowledge and skills, their gender identity- as women- stands as a major stumbling block which continually subjects them to the manifest and latent pulls of a patriarchal system.

The discussion in the preceding section makes it amply clear that although numeric presence is necessary, it can certainly not be a sufficient condition for women's full, equal and informed participation in political, social and economic decision-making. Undoubtedly, the reservation policy has

Paper ID: SUB157511

1072

gifted women with accessibility to the decision-making positions and has broadened the local democratic base, but over the decades a growing chasm is witnessed between the expected and actual levels of their performance. The real test of empowerment lies in their ability to participate in and influence the local decision-making process. Currently, female councillors in India lack requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes for change. Empirical evidences point to a host of distinct yet inter-related limitations that prevent genuine inclusion of women in local governance. Some of the major challenges that affect women from effective participation at local level include, inter-alia: lack of initiation in urban development issues and municipal administration, no proper knowledge & orientation about municipal acts and rules and regulations, no prior experience about dealing with multidimensional urban development issues or civic issues and its complexities, lack of knowledge about technical inputs related to urban service delivery system, lack of support from senior male / female colleagues in the party, municipal officials, lack of money and resources to sustain the electoral campaigns (in spite of code of conduct by election commission), lack of confidence in public speaking. criminalisation of politics and use of money power and family responsibilities.

6. Conclusion

Based on this study, it could be plausibly concluded that a resilient framework of capacity development needs to be constructed to bridge the existing gaps. This country assessment of women participation in ULBs builds a compelling case in favour of their capacity development. Conceptually, capacity development strategy is grounded in a thorough understanding of the constraints that obstruct the flourishing of latent human potentials. The individuals that make up organizations and societies need the skills, knowledge and experiences to grow and transform the world around them. Within municipal governments, the women councillors need to learn skills and acquire knowledge that will empower and equip them to act as active agents of development and change. This ability is not only conditioned by factors internal to the individual (skills, knowledge) or the organization (human resources), but also by a number of external dimensions, such as societal norms and values, political environment and legal and administrative realities.

The study has several research applications in policy evaluation and integration. Mainstreaming gender in urban development being a relatively new area of enquiry, the findings of this study offer useful insights to urban planners and policy-makers for drawing up an accommodating framework for gender integration in national policies pertaining to decentralization, urban development, local governance and civic engagement. It practically contributes in providing substantive inputs on implementation of the 74th CAA and recommendations of the government appointed Administrative Reforms Commission and State Finance Commission. As the study explores gender role and performance across India, it will significantly influence the quality of leadership, administration and institutional management and thus help re-orient planning policy, development initiatives, investment, capacity development

towards sustainable urban development. Internationally, the study will offer an authentic and updated insight into possible opportunities and challenges for women in India's urban governance, which is home to the one of the world's largest representation of women in local development.

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Paper ID: SUB157511