

**Developing a Research Agenda  
on the Gender Dimensions of Decentralization:  
Background Paper for the IDRC 2003  
Gender Unit Research Competition**

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### **I. Introduction**

Within its thematic framework of Gender, Citizenship and Entitlement, IDRC's Gender Unit is planning a research competition on the theme of "Gender and Decentralization." The goal of the competition is to generate research on the gendered impacts and dimensions of state decentralization reforms and decentralized systems of government in developing countries. This research should build on existing knowledge, offer new insights, and be useful to people actively engaged in efforts to advance gender equality as part of more just, sustainable development processes. This background paper is intended to help orient the competition. It does so by exploring the state of research, knowledge and debate related to gender and decentralization, surveying current research and initiatives relevant to the theme, suggesting a conceptual framework for the competition, and identifying promising areas for research.

The paper is based on a literature review as well as an internal and external "scoping exercise," involving internet searches and telephone, email, and in-person consultation with researchers and representatives of external organizations, and selected IDRC programme staff. The "scoping exercise" was intended to assist in determining the level of interest in the competition theme and its perceived relevance, including identifying research priorities and specific research questions arising out of ongoing work, both within and outside of IDRC. It was also intended to identify some key organizations and individuals engaged in work relevant to the theme. In addition to the bibliography, annexes at the end of the paper list those consulted and contacted during the preparation of the paper, as well as listing selected resources, initiatives and organizations with relevance to the competition theme.

## II. Decentralization and Development: What, How and Why?

### A. *What is decentralization? Definitions and classifications*

An overwhelming majority of developing countries are currently engaged in decentralization of one kind or another, or have introduced decentralization reforms since the early 1980s. According to one source, 80% of developing and “transitional” countries (Eastern and Central Europe) are engaged in decentralization (Manor, 1999: viii). But what are these processes? As a starting point, decentralization may be defined as referring to political and administrative reforms that transfer varying amounts and combinations of function, responsibility, resources, and political and fiscal autonomy to lower tiers of the state (e.g. regional, district, or municipal governments, or decentralized units of the central government). Decentralization may also transfer functions and responsibilities to quasi-state or private institutions (Rondinelli 2002). In the contemporary context, decentralization is frequently associated with privatization in areas such as service provision. Decentralization is also linked to new forms of interaction between a variety of institutional actors (including NGOs and community groups) at the local level, often characterized as “partnerships” (Evans, 1997; Reilly, 1995; Work, 1999).

This general definition covers a diversity of processes that can be classified in a number of ways (Rondinelli 1981; Smith 1985; Conyers 1986; Manor 1999; Furtado 2001; Rondinelli 2002; Work 2002). At the most basic level, it is possible to distinguish between “political decentralization” and “administrative decentralization.” The former emphasizes a redistribution of power, while the latter emphasizes a redistribution of function. However, the reality is usually more complex. Standard classifications of decentralization usually allude to the following terms (based primarily on Rondinelli 2002; Work 2002):

- **Political decentralization** (sometimes called “democratic decentralization”) refers to the devolution of decision making power to subnational political authorities. This process may create new tiers of government or it may change the way existing subnational tiers of governments are formed and structured (e.g. from appointed to elected mayors or state governors). In either case, it generally involves constitutional change.
- **Administrative decentralization** refers to the transfer of specific public functions to lower tiers of the state. Such decentralization can take several forms:
  - a) **Deconcentration** transfers functions (such as decision making, planning, and management in specific areas, such as health, education, or community development) to units of the central government that are distributed throughout the country. As Rondinelli points out, the impact can vary greatly, since “deconcentration can merely shift responsibilities from central government officials in the capital city to those working in regions, provinces or districts; or it can create strong field administration or local administrative capacity under the supervision of central government ministries.”
  - b) **Delegation** passes responsibilities to organizations that are accountable to the central government, but not entirely controlled by it, such as public corporations, housing authorities, and regional development corporations.

- c) **Devolution** transfers responsibilities to subnational units of government that have a specified degree of autonomy from the central government. As Rondinelli points out, such **administrative devolution** “underlies most political decentralization; creating elected local governments is irrelevant unless they have recognized areas of responsibility over which to exercise their decision making power.”
- d) **Divestment** transfers responsibilities or functions from the public to the private sector—whether to community groups, NGOs, or private business. This transfer can take different forms, including “contracting out,” “public-private partnership” (as mentioned above), or full privatization. Public authorities, whether central or local, can maintain varying degrees of regulatory control over divested functions.
  - **Fiscal Decentralization** refers to how responsibility for expenditures and allocations is distributed across the different levels of a decentralized system.

Including privatization—or “divestment” (Work 2002) or “market decentralization” (Rondinelli 2002) within the definition of decentralization is controversial. In a study of “democratic decentralization,” Manor excludes privatization for two reasons: first, because it involves a transfer of responsibilities outside of the sphere of government, and second, because the private firms involved are often themselves very large, so that “privatization often involves a shift of power and resources from one major, centralized power center to another” (Manor 1999: 5). At a UNIFEM conference on decentralization and gender, participants noted that while decentralization can be linked to privatization, “this is not an integrated part of decentralization as a concept. The word decentralization focuses on the process itself, not on the result, the system of governance” (UNIFEM/VADE 2001: 5). Nonetheless, including privatization in the definition captures a significant reality about decentralization in the current era, when it is often advocated as part of a broader transformation toward market-oriented adjustment, carried out in a context of economic crisis. While it is important from a conceptual standpoint to avoid conflating the two processes, there is little question that in the current policy environment, they are often closely linked (Slater 1989: 520).

Fiscal arrangements for financing decentralized responsibilities—which are a key element of decentralization—vary, and there is a substantial literature in this area (Bird and Vaillancourt 1998; Bahl 1999; de Mello Jr. 2000; World Bank 2000; Livingston and Charlton 2001; Garman et. al. 2001). Fiscal decentralization can be achieved either through transfers from the central state, or through subnational revenue generation. Subnational revenue generation may include local tax collection, fines and fees, the acquisition of debt, and the receipt of development assistance from donors. Local level institutions can also engage in cost recovery by charging user fees for services, privatizing functions, or promoting “co-financing” or “co-production,” in which local people contribute money or labour to help provide services and infrastructure (Rondinelli 1999: 3).

In developing countries, where local communities are predominantly poor, the capacity for local revenue generation is often very low, and transfers from the central government

are usually by far the most important source of financing for local authorities. These transfers may take a variety of forms, depending on the degree of autonomy in expenditure allocation granted to the subnational level. The central government can transfer a lump sum and allow subnational authorities to decide how to spend it, or funds can be earmarked for specific sectors or programmes. Transfers from the central government are also used as a means of promoting inter-regional equity. In Colombia, for example, under a 1993 law, central government transfers to municipalities are distributed according to a formula that combines the size of the local population with their degree of need. Moreover, 80% of these funds are earmarked for specific sectors (Angell et. al. 2001: 31-2).

In practice, the various types and forms of decentralization are not as easy to distinguish as their definitions suggest. In addition, they often occur simultaneously, follow upon one another, or are mixed and matched. In some cases, genuine political devolution occurs. Subnational levels of government with significant autonomy are created or empowered with new resources and new areas of responsibility. Local elections may be introduced for the first time, replacing the appointment of local officials by the central administration. Alternatively, new functions may be transferred to existing local authorities. In other cases, decentralization is strictly administrative, entailing the deconcentration or delegation of certain functions to regional or local offices of the central state while supervision and decisionmaking authority are maintained at the centre. Decentralization measures may also focus on specific sectors, with responsibility in areas such as health, education, transportation infrastructure, or watershed management, passed to subnational administrative branches of the central state, or to local governments. Frequently, sector decentralization involves a sharing of responsibilities between local governments and central state authorities.

In Bolivia—often held up as a model case—political decentralization was enacted in 1994, with the devolution of new resources and responsibilities to elected municipal governments—many of them newly-created. Legislation also established mechanisms for citizen participation in, and oversight of, municipal planning and resource allocation. The reform was accompanied by a revenue sharing arrangement with the central government and the expansion of the rights of municipalities to generate their own revenue. A year after this political decentralization was legislated, the central government passed an administrative decentralization law that transferred certain functions to departmental (regional) units headed by central government appointed “prefects.” An important function of these regional branches of the central government—in theory at least—is to liaise with and support municipalities. Meanwhile, sector reforms focussed on decentralizing some responsibilities related to health and education to the municipal government, with local citizen committees, as well as the regional and central tiers of the national state also continuing to play important roles (MacLean 2003).

What is important in analyzing particular cases of decentralization is to be clear about the precise form that decentralization takes, asking *what* is decentralized, *how* it is decentralized, and *to what extent* it is decentralized. The great range of answers to these questions, the economic, political, and cultural diversity of contexts in which

decentralization is carried out, and the variety of motivations behind decentralization reforms all complicate comparisons. Recent literature on decentralization, in particular, tends to recognize that there is no such thing as “decentralization” *per se*, and that decentralization is neither inherently positive or negative, but depends for its success on the design, implementation, and context of the reforms.

## **B. Selected issues in decentralization**

As we have seen, decentralization processes are extremely complex and diverse, and their implementation raises an enormous number of technical and political questions. Technical questions of concern to policymakers include how to structure local institutions, how best to pace and sequence decentralization reforms, what kinds of service delivery mechanisms are most successful, which services or sectors should be decentralized and which function better under central control, what kind of fiscal arrangements work best, and how to reconcile decentralized control with national policies and strategies. Political questions have to do with analyzing and dealing with the power dynamics involved in decentralization reforms. They include how to cope with entrenched opposition to decentralization, establishing which actors and interests benefit from decentralization and how, finding mechanisms to circumvent elite capture at the local level, establishing the role of local civil society in decentralized systems, establishing accountability mechanisms, how to work out the relationship between traditional local authorities (such as indigenous leaders or village chiefs) and decentralized government institutions, and how to promote effective participation by marginalized groups. Rather than attempting to discuss these questions in detail, this section instead focuses on three broad, relatively theoretical issues central to debates on decentralization, with particular relevance to an exploration of the gender dimensions of decentralization.

### **a. Efficiency vs. empowerment**

Decentralization reforms have been implemented at different times, in different ways, in many different parts of the world. The motivation for implementing these reforms has frequently been highly political, in the narrow sense—an attempt to gain local support for national political parties or movements, cultivate local allies, extend authoritarian political controls into remote regions of a nation, satisfy the requirements of international donors and lenders, or diffuse pressures for national democratization (Manor 1999: 38-39). It is by no means appropriate to assume that decentralization is always implemented for what Manor calls “worthy” reasons that match officially-cited rationales. The history of decentralized governance in Africa, for example, is closely linked to colonial domination. And in Latin America, one of the pioneers of decentralization was the authoritarian Pinochet regime in Chile.

During the current “wave” of decentralization worldwide, however, decentralization has gradually emerged “as a development strategy” (Jordan and Simioni 1998: 80)—despite the fact that the literature is replete with warnings that it should not be viewed as a panacea. The result is that decentralization appeals to and is promoted by a wide range of institutional and political actors, and consequently occupies an important place within quite different “development discourses.” The bearers of these discourses often cite

similar reasons for supporting decentralization, but they differ in their emphasis and approach, reflecting what some would understand as their fundamentally distinct visions of development.

In the first discourse, associated with what may be called the mainstream development establishment (including major bilateral donors, the international financial institutions, many UN agencies and many national government officials and policy experts), the primary reasons for supporting decentralization can be grouped under the rough heading of “efficiency.” Decentralization is advocated on the grounds that lower tiers of the state (or, in the case of privatization, private firms) can administer services or engage in development efforts more effectively and efficiently than the central state because they are closer to the people who use and benefit from them. Proximity is supposed to allow for greater responsiveness as a result of better access to information about local preferences, needs, and conditions (Smith 1985: 28).

Decentralization is also supposed to allow local resources to be mobilized more effectively. One argument is that when people can see the immediate benefits of services and other initiatives, they will be more willing to contribute financially and in other ways to maintaining them, facilitating cost-recovery (Litvack and Seddon 1999). In general, decentralization is often expected to reduce spending and thus contribute to programmes of fiscal restraint, making it appear both to proponents and critics as a cost-cutting measure. According to Manor, there is little evidence to support the view that decentralization is implemented in order to cut costs, and in practice, rarely reduces public expenditure (Manor 1999: 109).

Nonetheless, the recent decentralization reforms in many developing countries have been carried out against a backdrop of economic crisis, and decentralization has emerged as a standard component of state reform and economic restructuring packages. Critics—including many of those consulted for this paper—interpret the enthusiasm for decentralization within this discourse largely as a means of facilitating privatization, linked to market-oriented structural adjustment carried out within the overall framework of capitalist globalization. As one African scholar writes, the World Bank has pushed for decentralization as part of a “good governance package” aimed at moving away from:

*the undue intervention of the state in the economy and overcentralized decision making to the decentralization of economic and political power. In this view, engendering a situation where ordinary people take charge of their lives by becoming actively involved in their own governance will bring eventual recovery from economic and political crisis. Thus, accountable, efficient, and effective government in smaller political units enables the rooting of grassroots politics organized through non-governmental activism in creating a stable political system wherein a liberal market system can thrive (Okome 2000).*

These “good governance” arguments for decentralization are linked to the emergence of an “institutionalist” turn in the mainstream development establishment (World Bank 1998). Within the new institutionalist paradigm, there is a consensus that appropriate institutions for both political and economic governance are crucial to the success of

development efforts. The focus on institutions and governance involves an important tempering of the anti-statism that was often implicit in the first generation of stabilization and structural adjustment initiated in the 1980s in response to the debt crisis. While the emphasis during the first phase of market-oriented adjustment was on reducing the size and scope of the state, in the 1990s there was a recognition that, especially in developing countries, effective and capable states were a necessary ingredient in the development process. While the World Bank and others continued to advocate market-based solutions to development, including extensive privatization, they also stressed the need to develop strong state institutions capable of providing predictable and transparent rules-based regimes that would encourage private investment, provide social compensation, and generate political legitimacy and stability (World Bank 1998; World Bank 1997).

Within this “establishment” discourse, the importance of empowerment is primarily instrumental. Empowerment is beneficial because it allows more accurate information about people’s needs and preferences to be relayed more efficiently, facilitating resource allocations and service provision that deliver what individuals and groups of individuals need, want, and are willing to pay for (either indirectly through taxes or directly through user fees or volunteer labour). Power inequality and inequity are important to the extent that they distort the capacity of decentralized systems to adequately reflect such preferences, thereby contributing to failures of efficiency.

Meanwhile, development and social justice activists in community organizations, local and international NGOs and CSOs, as well as their allies in the research and academic communities are often attracted to decentralization because they believe it can enhance equity and democracy. From the perspective of development discourses that emphasize sustainability, justice and agency, the primary rationales for decentralization fall under the heading of “empowerment.” In this second vision, decentralization—normally understood as political devolution, or democratic decentralization—is advocated because it is supposed to give citizens better opportunities to participate in, influence, and monitor decision making and resource allocation, empowering them to gain more control over the public decisions that affect their well-being.

Within this discourse, there is a recognition that poverty (and hence “development”) is not solely a question of material conditions, but also, fundamentally, a question of power. In this vein, John Friedmann’s “(dis)empowerment” model of poverty is helpful: he points out that poor people not only lack food, shelter, employment and other basic needs, but also lack access to the “bases of social power,” and that this disempowerment is what perpetuates their material poverty (Friedmann 1992). Yet the concern for empowerment goes beyond its poverty-reducing benefits. Although the goal is to improve the lives of poor people in concrete ways, power is a dominant theme, and equity and participation are emphasized as intrinsic—rather than merely instrumental—goods. The importance of empowerment is rooted in a “Freirean” understanding of human agency and dignity.

Of course, decentralization is not universally promoted by critics of the dominant development discourse. In particular, the traditional left has tended to see decentralization

primarily as a means of fragmenting the power of the working class (Friedmann 1992: 80-81). Another concern is that by focusing attention on the locality, decentralization may draw attention away from national and global arenas where some of the most important decisions, about macroeconomic policy, for example, are made. Dilla Alfonso cautions that “[w]ithout a clear reference to the central state and to ‘high politics,’ grassroots democracy will reverse into a niche of self-management of minor themes, prone to be subordinate to clientelistic relations” (Dilla Alfonso 1997: 184-5).

Both in the theoretical literature on participation and democracy, and in current literature on decentralization, the locality is frequently presented as the space where citizens can best learn democratic political practice (Pateman 1970; Magnusson 1996). Since local government is smaller in scale and closer at hand, it is expected to be more accessible. Moreover, the argument is that people will be more interested and active in local than in national politics because it deals with matters that are of most importance in their day-to-day lives—such as local transportation, solid waste disposal, community infrastructure, road maintenance and, increasingly, the provision of services such as health care, child care, and water. The proximity of citizens to local government is also supposed to facilitate accountability and possibly reduce corruption, thus magnifying the benefits of access (Smith, 1985: 26; Fisman and Gatti 2002).

Government at the local level is also expected to be more representative. For example, decentralized political systems are sometimes promoted in order to allow national minorities to gain representation and defend their collective interests at the subnational level, thus contributing to integration and promoting the legitimacy and stability of the national political system (Smith 1985: 27). This rationale is seen dramatically in cases such as the ethnically-based decentralized regime initiated in Ethiopia in 1991 after three decades of ethnic conflict (Beyene 2000; Cohen 1997), or in Nigerian federalism (Okome 2000), but it is also a factor in other cases. A major reason cited for political decentralization in Bolivia, for example, is that it opens new political spaces at the local level, especially for rural indigenous people, who have traditionally been excluded from political life.

In the context of the enthusiasm for civil society in recent years, decentralization has also been popular on the assumption that it offers more opportunities for the engagement of civil society with the state (Reilly 1995; Douglass and Friedmann 1998). According to one Philippine researcher, civil society organizations complement local government roles as service providers, but in addition, they “act as pressure points that compel local governments to be more efficient and effective in delivering local goods and services.[...] [t]he synergy between decentralization and civil society structures...could pave the way for empowering peoples and communities” (Gonzales 2000). Moreover, because it takes place at the local level, such engagement is expected to involve groups and individuals that are more representative of the population.

Of course, “efficiency” and “empowerment” rationales for decentralization often overlap, and decentralization is usually promoted for reasons that fall into both categories. Increasingly, in fact, the “establishment” discourse reflects the language and (some

would contend) the concerns of the “alternative” discourse. In fact, decentralization is one area in which the growing convergence between political and economic concerns in development is most evident. As James Ford writes in a World Bank document:

*Although politics is the driving force behind decentralization in most countries, decentralization may be one of those happy instances in which good politics and good economics serve the same end. The political objectives of increased political responsiveness and participation at the local level can coincide with the economic objectives of better decisions about the use of public resources and increased willingness to pay for services (Ford 1999).*

Research on gender and decentralization is relevant within both the development discourses identified above; however, neither has a strong track record with respect to gender equality. The history of women’s movements and gender advocacy within development is one of constant struggle to ensure that women’s voices and needs are taken account of—not only by governments and donors, but also by social activists. A recent survey of work in the area of gender and participatory approaches makes this point clearly (Akerkar 2001). Within the “establishment” discourse, research on gender and decentralization would probably be characterized in terms of “gender impacts.” Within the “alternative” discourse (or discourses), such research could be characterized more widely as exploring the “gender dimensions” of decentralization. Many of the research questions that arise are the same, but the research agenda arising out of the alternative discourse is transformative, rather than technical. That is, it aims not simply at generating information that will assist in more successful implementation of decentralization policies, within the existing political-economic framework, but rather it aims to contribute to the promotion of decentralization as part of an overall strategy to bring about fundamental changes—in favour of justice, empowerment, and sustainability—in the framework itself.

## **b. Decentralization and globalization**

Decentralization draws attention to the local level, yet the transfer of new and more complex responsibilities to lower tiers of government occurs at the same time that globalization is drawing attention to the influence of transnational dynamics, such as the operation of global markets, international trade and investment flows and regimes, global environmental problems, the emergence of “global civil society,” and the globalization of culture. Some analysts argue that the power of the nation-state to organize and control what occurs within its territorial boundaries is being seriously eroded, a development that has significant, if uncertain, consequences for the local level (Castells 1997; Deacon 1997). The impacts of decentralization therefore relate not only to whether it helps make the voices of citizens heard and heeded at the local or even the national level, but also to how the reforms affect the capacity of citizens to control the impact of global forces on their day-to-day lives.

For some, the globalization of economies is not matched by the growth of equally powerful political mechanisms that would allow people to control and shape the impacts of technology, investment, trade and other global economic forces in their local environments (Boggs, 2001). Some observers see the forces of economic globalization

pitting localities against each other in a competitive “race to the bottom,” with those who are peripheral to the global economy marginalized both politically and economically. With decentralization giving local authorities a greater role in the management and promotion of development, municipal governments in developing countries—especially urban ones—must try to enhance the competitiveness of their cities in order to attract investment and employment. Meanwhile, in order to attract investment, as well as to satisfy the needs of their growing populations, local authorities must also provide services and infrastructure—and decentralization reforms increasingly transfer these responsibilities to local authorities (McCarney 1996: 8).

In a situation of scarce resources, the demands of global competitiveness may interact with local power dynamics with negative consequences for the poor and vulnerable. Local elites and transnational corporations are usually in a better position than poor and vulnerable citizens to make and enforce claims on local government. As a result, servicing the modern economy, rather than achieving an equitable distribution of services, may become the priority. Jo Beall found evidence of such a trend in her research in South Africa and Pakistan. On the basis of case studies in Faisalabad and Johannesburg, she found that “the new socially excluded are those who are superfluous to the requirements of the global economy,” and that the “exclusionary processes associated with globalization...graft themselves onto local political dynamics of social exclusion” (Beall 2002).

At the same time, some view globalization as offering new opportunities for democratic governance at the international level. On this view, rather than “losing” sovereignty to supranational organizations such as WTO, nations are instead “pooling sovereignty” in order to ensure a rules-based regime in certain areas, such as trade (Consultation with Susan Joeques). Subnational governments may then be seen as part of an integrated system of governance that stretches from the local to the global. If decentralization is accompanied by the establishment of democratic processes and institutions that increase citizen participation and accountability and redresses inequalities, then it may be seen as an integral link in a strategy that can help to promote both democracy and just development.

From a gender perspective, the globalization-decentralization dialectic may pose both opportunities and dangers. Participants in the UNIFEM workshop on gender and decentralization mentioned above were wary of how the connections between these two processes could affect women’s interests. If globalization is equated with growing, unaccountable power for international investors, and decentralization is equated with attempts to create favourable investment environments at the local level, including the reduction of state social spending and the privatization of services and resources, then from the perspective “of poor women in the South...the links between globalisation processes and decentralisation appear strong and threatening” (UNIFEM/VADE 2001: 8). As much of the literature on the gendered dimensions of structural adjustment has argued, women, because of their gender roles and subordinate position, find themselves bearing the brunt of cuts in social spending and services. Decentralization of responsibility in these areas appears as a matter of shifting social burdens onto women, who lack political

voice, but are seen as being able to “cope” efficiently with fewer resources and more responsibilities.

Yet, globalization may also offer new opportunities for women. New communications technologies, the emergence of “globalization from below,” global arenas, institutions and campaigns promoting gender equality goals, such as the Beijing Conference, and work around CEDAW, along with other global civil society efforts—such as the Social Forum movement—to promote more just, sustainable societies, offer new resources of solidarity, information and support for women at the local level. The challenge from this perspective is for women and gender advocates to find ways of connecting local experiences and initiatives, and forming locally-grounded national, regional and global alliances. In this way, the globalization/decentralization dialectic may increase women’s resources for struggle, rather than isolating them in vulnerable, dispersed units subject to the power of global forces beyond their reach and control.

### **c. Decentralization, participation and poverty reduction**

In the past, participation in development generally referred to participation in community development projects. Increasingly, however, the concept “is being related to rights of citizenship and to democratic governance” (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999). Blair (2000) discusses how increased participation can lead to better representation, empowerment, and a better distribution of resources at the local level, thus contributing to poverty reduction. He argues that participation and accountability are crucial to effective democratic local governance for poverty reduction. Osmani (2000) also argues that decentralization can play a key role in poverty reduction if it promotes effective citizen participation. As we saw above, this argument is based on the premise that participatory mechanisms at the local level that allow people to express their needs and preferences can improve local service delivery and make local development efforts more appropriate, effective and inclusive.

Growing pressures for democratization from local and international civil society, as well from the development establishment, along with the belief that greater participation can improve poverty reduction efforts, have meant that decentralization is almost invariably accompanied by the establishment of mechanisms for citizen participation at the local level. Local elections allow people to choose their representatives, but participation is also promoted through a variety of more direct means through which people can express their needs and preferences and take part in the design, implementation and monitoring of local development or service provision schemes. There are numerous mechanisms and processes through which such direct participation can be exercised, some of them new, some of them based on traditional community governance structures. They include rural village or urban neighbourhood development committees, popular assemblies, participatory budgeting exercises and local health or education committees, local resource user groups such as community forestry groups or water committees (Osmani 2000).

However, as Osmani points out, anecdotal evidence of success tends to be outweighed by the many failures of participatory decentralization. While in theory, the creation or

recognition of such community level participatory fora within decentralized governance systems facilitates empowerment and promotes poverty reduction, in practice there are many obstacles to achieving full, equal and effective participation. Local communities are not homogeneous, and inequalities between individuals and groups mean that the poorest, most marginalized or most vulnerable face disadvantages in participation. In fact, a major risk of decentralization is that by shifting more power to the local level, the reforms may pave the way for the capture of political processes—and resources—by local elites, or reinforce local elites' existing domination (Bardhan and Mookherjee 1999; Ribot 2002: 46). Enthusiasm for community participation has in the past sometimes obscured the reality that communities are never homogeneous, but instead contain a variety of groups and interests, and are often characterized by complex power dynamics. More recent work on participatory approaches are increasingly coming to terms with how vulnerable and marginalized groups in local communities—including women—can be harmed through processes that fail to take account of their relatively disadvantaged position (Guijit and Shah 1998).

Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) point out a number of other obstacles to effective participation as well. Some of these have to do with the capacity of citizens to participate, a variable that depends in part on the level and history of mobilization in civil society. It is also related to the availability of appropriate skills, knowledge and experience required for effective participation. Local officials also need appropriate skills for engaging in participatory processes. In addition, effective participation requires political will on the part of local and national authorities committed to “providing and enforcing opportunities for participation” (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999). The impact of participation may also be weak if it is engaged only in a consultative, rather than a decisionmaking capacity. Finally, a lack of resources to implement decisions, or a lack of local control over the allocation of these resources, can undermine effective participation. Research and case studies on local participation also suggest a number of strategies which have proven useful in overcoming barriers to effective participation. These include the formal introduction (through legislation) of participatory planning strategies, citizen education and awareness building, training and sensitizing local officials in participatory approaches, advocacy, collaboration and the construction of alliances, the use of participatory budgeting, and the strengthening of accountability mechanisms (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999).

Accountability is in many ways at the heart of this set of issues—“the most crucial element in successful decentralizations” (Manor 1999: 7). In a survey on decentralization in Africa, Jesse Ribot writes that decentralized systems include mechanisms of “horizontal accountability”—that is, accountability to other state actors, such as other units and levels of government—and “vertical accountability”—accountability to actors outside the state, such as individual citizens, the media, or civil society organizations. Ribot uses the term “downward accountability” to describe accountability to the public (Ribot 2002: 29). According to Ribot, decentralization reforms in Africa tend to create local institutions that are “upwardly” accountable to the central government, with downward accountability mechanisms—such as local elections—that are weak for a variety of reasons, including the influence of national political parties on local politics,

the influence of local elites, or the prevalence of central government appointment of local authorities.

Although democratic decentralization has gained widespread acceptance as a development and poverty alleviation strategy, recent empirical evidence casts doubt on the assumption that there is a link between the two processes. One multi-country study found that in most of the cases, decentralization did not bring about “pro-poor” results. Only the state of West Bengal, in India, and some states in northeastern Brazil performed well, and the study found that this performance was associated with strong support from central government or state levels of government. Elite capture of elected local governments was prevalent in the cases studied (Crook and Sverrisson, 2001).

Recent research from the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex similarly contradicts the assumption that political devolution brings greater benefits to local populations than administrative decentralization. Studies found that administrative decentralization appears to have the most positive effect on poverty alleviation, measured according to the proportion of public spending devoted to health, education, social security, social welfare, housing and community amenities. Meanwhile, the study found that political decentralization had a negative effect on poverty alleviation. The authors conclude that “because the poor lack political and organisational resources at local level, they have a political advantage in the continuing centralisation of political and government institutions” (Schneider and Moore 2003). In a working paper for the Overseas Development Institute, Johnson and Start (2001) point out the political nature of poverty alleviation policies, and questions the idea that “poor people will automatically engage in the opportunities that democracies provide” since the costs of political action for poor people are “disproportionately high.”

There are a number of issues of specific relevance to women related to decentralized participation. For women, the risk that decentralization will lead to elite capture or reinforce existing inequalities at the local level may be especially great, because gender relations at the local level are frequently more unequal and oppressive than at the national level, and local political culture less supportive of women’s rights and participation (UNIFEM/VADE 2001: 9). Decentralized decision making and resource allocation, as well as the decentralization of control over political spaces, may therefore put women in a more vulnerable position rather facilitating their empowerment. Moreover, the term participation itself can be a slippery one, and it cannot be assumed that women’s participation necessarily means having effective access to decisionmaking arenas; sometimes, it simply means that women are taking part in an initiative, or volunteering their labour power (Consultation with Bodil Maal).

In considering the opportunities offered by local participation, it must also be borne in mind that women usually face more obstacles than men—from cultural barriers to time constraints—when it comes to participation. In addition, the issue of community heterogeneity applies not only to the experience of women vis à vis other groups, but also to the experience of different women within the community. Women are divided and stratified in numerous ways. According to staff of the Asian Development Bank, for

example: “in a country like Indonesia, where populations are characterized by socio-cultural and religious heterogeneity, and where fiscal capacity is limited at both the central and...regional levels, more in-depth assessments of stakeholders, capacity, and differentiated needs and interests are required to determine what type of assistance is needed to support women's increased participation in decentralized decision making. Women themselves are divided across various ethnicities. How can they come up with a unified gender agenda?” (Consultation with Sonomi Tanaka).

Meanwhile, the evidence cited above about the “pro-poor” outcomes of political versus administrative decentralizations suggests that political devolution should not always be expected to advance gender equality goals. These outcomes would depend on many variables, such as political culture at local and national levels, institutional arrangements, and the level of mobilization of women and gender equality advocates at different levels. While devolution may, under certain circumstances, open opportunities for political participation and leadership at the local level, women’s interests may fare better when significant authority is retained at higher levels of government. Yet, if increased political agency is viewed as inherently valuable from a gender perspective, then the challenge is to identify the conditions under which political devolution can work for women, resulting in gender equal participation as well as equal access to gender-responsive services and resources.

### **III. Research and Action on Gender and Decentralization**

#### **A. *External initiatives related to gender and decentralization***

Given the widespread recognition of gender equality as a crucial variable in development, as well as the widespread promotion of decentralization as a development strategy, the importance of considering the gender dimensions of decentralization is clear. It could be expected that gender analysis and concerns would be mainstreamed into the design and implementation of decentralization reforms and that there would be a substantial amount of research and activity aimed at exploring the gender impacts and dimensions of decentralization. However, the literature review and scoping exercise suggest that this has not generally been the case to date. As we will see below, there has been considerable activity related to women in local governance, but attention to the gender dimensions of decentralization processes is rare.

It also appears that little academic research has been framed under the heading of “gender and decentralization.” Some exceptions include work on Senegal (Patterson 2002); in Uganda and Zimbabwe (Dauda 2001); on Uganda (Saito 2002); and Nigeria (Okome 2000). It is important to note that many more studies by local researchers whose work is not easily accessible in Canada or over the internet probably exist; drawing attention to this material would be an important contribution of the GU competition. Meanwhile, the general literature on decentralization is largely devoid of significant gender analysis. For the most part, hypotheses about gender dimensions of decentralization must be formulated by extrapolating from how the literature deals with other issues. Only in a few cases (e.g. Crook and Manor 1998), is gender consistently integrated into the research

and analysis. There is a clear need for high quality research work dealing specifically with gender dimensions of decentralization.

Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness of the relevance of this topic in a wide range of institutions, from the international financial institutions to local NGOs. At the World Bank, for example, the World Bank Institute (WBI—the branch responsible for training) has recently initiated a Gender and Decentralization project within the Public Finance, Decentralization and Poverty Reduction Program. Under the project, case study material is being collected on various aspects of gender and decentralization, including issues of integovernmental relations, fiscal decentralization, and participation. This information is forming the basis of specialized decentralization training sessions on gender, or being integrated into mainstream course materials, which are disseminated to World Bank staff and country officials. The project has also launched an online forum on “Gender and Decentralization.” In addition, the officer for Gender and Decentralization is currently (Spring 2003) preparing a background paper on gender and decentralization which will be posted on the website and will serve as the basis for a core WBI module on “Gender and Decentralization” (Consultation with Roxanne Scott).

The World Bank’s Development Research Group is also involved in a number of research projects that touch on gender and decentralization issues. A project looking at the impact of rural democratic decentralization in village panchayats in South India, for example, considers the impact of reserved seats for women on village decisions and the quality of governance. There is also current research comparing the gendered impacts at the household level of village democratization and fiscal decentralization (Consultation with Karen Mason).

While it does not appear that gender has been mainstreamed into donors’ overall support to decentralization, this may be changing. At the Asian Development Bank (ADB), in addition to providing support to locally elected women and technical assistance related to gender equality to local government officials, there are efforts to mainstream gender equality in decentralization. In January 2003, for example, the ADB signed an agreement for a US\$7 million technical assistance loan to assist with the implementation of a national Gender Reform Action Plan, which includes work on improving women’s participation in governance, on restructuring institutions (particularly at the local level) dealing with gender and social development issues, and on gender-responsive planning and budgeting, with the aim of improving the gender equality of local service delivery. In Indonesia, an ADB loan in the area of capacity-building for decentralization includes the implementation of Gender Action Plans with monitorable benchmarks on gender. The ADB also has a regional technical assistance programme on gender and governance issues at the local level in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan (Consultation with Sonomi Tanaka).

Other initiatives related to gender and decentralization include the Gender and Decentralization programme of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in the Netherlands. The Italian ministry of co-operation also appears to be interested in this area. Last year, with the support of the Italian Ministry, UNIFEM and the Italian feminist network VADE

(Women's Alternative Voices Everywhere) hosted an international workshop entitled "Rethinking Gender, Democracy and Development: Is Decentralisation a tool for Local Effective Political Voice." This workshop appears to be one of the few international initiatives aimed at a wide-ranging exploration of gender and decentralization in all of its dimensions, from an explicitly feminist perspective, and the informal workshop report is a valuable resource for developing a research agenda in this area—as well as a list of international participants (UNIFEM/VADE 2001).

In addition to its involvement in this Italian workshop, UNIFEM supports a variety of initiatives that deal with women's political participation at the local level. However, it does not have programming organized specifically under the "gender and decentralization" heading. UNIFEM has also been active in supporting and promoting gendered budget analysis, including work at the local level (Consultation with Nisreem Alami). The work on gender-responsive budgets (much of it conducted through the Gender-Responsive Budgets Initiative jointly sponsored by UNIFEM and the Commonwealth Secretariat, with funding from IDRC), is highly relevant to the gender and decentralization theme. There is now a considerable amount of experience and expertise accumulated in this area (Borges Sugiyama 2002; Budlender and Hewitt 2002; Budlender et. al. 2002). Looking at government budgets from a gender perspective has a number of aims: it provides an opportunity to evaluate the impact of public spending on gender issues, as well as the gender impact of public spending in general, it provides information that is useful to advocacy efforts, and it serves to "highlight the 'invisibility' of women in the budget" (Borges Sugiyama 2002, 1). Most of the gendered budget analysis experience to date has occurred at the national level, but there have been initiatives at the local level, and there is growing interest in local gender budget analysis.

For the bilateral agencies surveyed, "gender and decentralization" does not appear to be an identified area of activity, although all those consulted felt it was an important topic. In general, donors are engaged in work to support women in government, or women in civil society, and this work is sometimes oriented to increasing women's voice and access to services and resources at the local level. For example, CIDA's Gender Equality Funds in South America have supported training for women in municipal governments, as well as efforts to mainstream gender analysis into municipal policymaking (Consultation with Lucie Bazinet). Through Asia Branch, CIDA also supports the National Commission for the Role of Filipino Women in piloting gender mainstreaming in local government planning (CIDA 2002). In its work in such African countries as Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania, the Norwegian official aid agency (NORAD) also supports work on gender and governance at the local level. However, most of NORAD's support to decentralization focusses on administrative aspects, and it does not appear that gender issues are highlighted in this work (Consultation with Bodil Maal).

The UNDP is one of the major promoters of decentralization as a democratic development strategy. In 2001, the agency reported a total of 253 decentralization-related programme activities in 95 countries. Half of the financial allotments in this area went to programmes in the sub-area of "Decentralization policies," which had to do with technical assistance in developing legal and policy frameworks, resources, and planning

for decentralization and local service delivery. While gender considerations may be mainstreamed in this area, an overview report makes no mention of gender dimensions of this programming. Instead, it appears that gender equality issues are mainly addressed in specific interventions in the categories of “Partnerships between local authorities and CSOs” (which accounts for about a quarter of the total financial allotment for decentralization support) and “Participation at the sub-national level” which accounts for just under another quarter of the financial allotment (UNDP 2002). Meanwhile, the UNDP’s gender and development programming, which has a focus on governance, appears to be aimed mainly at the national level—although the global programme on gender and governance does contain a sub-programme on the empowerment of women in decision-making which aims at promoting women’s empowerment in all spheres, “from community settings to the macroeconomic policy arena” (UNDP website).

## ***B. Related research and initiatives***

### **a. Women in local government and politics**

One area in which substantial work has been carried out is women in local government, by international donors as well as international and local NGOs and CSOs. In the past, most of the work on “women in politics” focused on the national scene. But as political decentralization, in combination with administrative and sectoral decentralization, has placed more emphasis on the local level, attention to the issues of women’s participation in local politics has grown. Many activists and policymakers have come to see the local level of government as a strategic site for advancing gender interests. According to an activist from South Africa’s Gender and Advocacy Programme (GAP), “Given the significance of local government in the lives of women, it is remarkable that gender activists have largely ignored local government as a site of struggle for gender equity.[...] It is hoped that with the increasing status of local government, this blind spot in gender activism will be overcome” (Van Donk, 2000). GAP itself has a strong programme related to women in local government, aimed at increasing women’s representation in local government, improving women’s access to participation in local decision-making, and working for gender equitable local service delivery (GAP website).

In 1998, the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) published a “Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government” which asserted its members’ commitment to promoting women’s participation in local government institutions around the world. In 2003, with funding from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, IULA also launched its Global Programme for the Promotion of Women in Local Decision Making. The aim of the programme is to promote equal representation of women in local government decision-making and the mainstreaming of gender in local government policy-making. In Canada, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has also taken action in this area. Last year, FCM’s international commission held a workshop on women in local governance, with participants from around the world (ICMD 2002).

Another relevant initiative is the 50-50 campaign launched by the New York-based Women Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) in 2000. The goal of the campaign is to increase the percentage of women in local and national politics

worldwide. While most of the focus of the campaign is on the national level, it has sparked action on local participation as well. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, the Network of Women's NGOs embarked on a project called Engendering Local Government. The project was aimed at "enhancing the campaign skills of gender-sensitive women candidates" in order to increase their chances of being elected. "When the results were tallied, the percentage of women representatives had reached its highest level ever" (WEDO 2001).

The Huairou Commission, funded by a number of donor agencies, including the UNDP, UN Habitat, UNIFEM, and IULA is the Huairou Commission, is an advocacy network of grassroots women's international organizations working to strengthen the capacity of grassroots women to influence decision making in their communities and to make policies and institutions more gender-responsive, primarily by sharing grassroots strategies. The Huairou Commission's innovative "Our Best Practices Campaign for Local Governance" facilitates "local-local" dialogue between grassroots women to identify and document grassroots solutions to issues of gender in local governance, in ways that validate women's local knowledge, take account of local differences, emphasize community priorities. In this way, the Campaign contributes to changing institutions and policies "from the bottom up" (Jaekel 2002).

Many interventions on women in local government and politics take place within an overall gender and governance framework. The Gender, Citizenship and Governance project of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) is one example. The programme focusses on Southern Africa and Asia, and focusses on incorporating gender into debates on good governance, and on developing strategies to promote gender equity in governance. In addition to training and information sharing, the programme has also sponsored a number of action research projects in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe, some dealing with local governance and participation (KIT website).

Interest in women's local political participation often reflects a belief that it is easier for women to enter politics at the local level. New forms of direct participation in planning are also expected to provide opportunities for women in civil society to advance their interests and needs. The classical view that local politics is a training ground for politics at the national level supports the idea that women can use local politics as an entry point. In addition, local governments—especially in the era of sectoral decentralization—are often responsible for providing public goods and services of most immediate concern to women, such as health, water, child care centres, transportation and community infrastructure (Van Donk 2000). However, the results for women in politics at the local level are mixed (Baden 1999).

Research on women in local government has focused on the numbers of women elected, the barriers and facilitating conditions to their participation, and the impact of their participation (IULA 1998b; Drage 2001). A comparative study of women in local government in the Asia-Pacific region found that although women are underrepresented in local government throughout the region, with participation ranging from 2% to 33%,

they have been more successful in gaining access to local than to national government. The reasons include the fact that it is easier for women to fit involvement in local government into their other responsibilities, that access to local government is less competitive, the existence of reserved positions for women in some countries, and greater acceptance of women's involvement in local politics, "as it is seen as an extension of women's involvement in their communities" (Drage 2001: 3). The study examines the various factors that affect women's involvement in local government, ranging from statutory provisions, availability of training, support networks, affirmative action initiatives, cultural norms, and electoral systems. The study also considers the impact of women's participation in terms of the issues they promote, their political style, and local gender equality outcomes.

Much research on women in local government has focused on the Indian case, where a system of reserved seats for women was established along with decentralization reforms which devolved power to rural Panchayats, or village councils and urban municipal corporations (Bryld 2000; Vyasulu and Vyasulu 2000; Tawa 2001; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2001; Raj and Nambiar et. al., 2003). The quota system has increased the number of women in local government, but the impact of their presence is less clear. Erik Bryld argues that decentralization in the Indian case reinforces the power of traditional, patriarchal elites at the local level, and that reserved seats for women have done little to change attitudes about women or women's political participation, much less to affect local policies. Bryld's research suggests that women elected into reserved seats lack the resources, such as literacy, wealth, or respect, to carry out their functions effectively, that they are not taken seriously by their male colleagues or the communities they are supposed to serve, and that they are often only token representatives, with male relatives exercising the real power. Other research, by contrast, suggests that the presence of women in village leadership positions does have important policy effects in that women "invest more in public goods most closely linked to women's concerns: drinking water, fuel and road construction" (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2001: 26). The same study found that women were more likely to participate if the leader of their village council was a woman.

In general, there is a consensus that while quotas, women-friendly electoral rules, and other institutional arrangements designed to promote women's participation are helpful, they are not enough to ensure genuine, effective participation by women (Goetz 2002). Training and other forms of support are also necessary, but more research is required to find out exactly what kinds of support work best, under what circumstances, learning from successful (and unsuccessful) experiments at the grassroots—especially experiments undertaken by grassroots women themselves (Jaeckel 2002?).

Women's political participation is not, of course, confined to formal political institutions. As we have seen, one of the major arguments in favour of decentralization is that it facilitates citizen participation by bringing the state "closer" to local communities, and many contemporary decentralization reforms involve the creation of new participatory processes and mechanisms (or sometimes the revival of traditional ones) designed to promote more active engagement of communities in local government. A number of

those consulted for this paper emphasized the importance of women and gender in civil society at the local level, and how local civil society is affected by decentralization—and vice versa.

### **b. Gender dimensions of sector decentralization**

Another relevant area in which there is ongoing activity and research is sector decentralization, including the gender dimensions of local service delivery, privatization, and local natural resource management. As we have seen, the main rationale for sector decentralization is improved responsiveness to local people's needs and local conditions, as well as greater cost-efficiency through a reduction in waste and greater ease in cost-recovery. Since women make up half the population, the responsiveness argument should mean that women gain better access to more appropriate services or better managed resources once these become local responsibilities. However, there is only a minimal amount of research aimed specifically at the gender dimensions of sector decentralization and privatization, and gender equality concerns do not appear to be mainstreamed into existing initiatives and research in this area to any significant degree.

One institution that has engaged in this area is the London-based NGO One World Action. In 2001, One World Action and the British Council organized a seminar entitled “Developing Gender-Sensitive Local Services” which brought together participants from around the world to discuss experiences and issues related to making decentralized service delivery more accessible to women, and more responsive to gender-differentiated needs. The initiative appears to be one of very few attempts to consider decentralized service delivery, overall, from a gender perspective, and the seminar report—which summarizes case studies from a number of countries, including Chile, El Salvador, Bangladesh, India, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and the Philippines, is a valuable resource (One World Action 2001). One of the conclusions of the seminar was that service delivery is never gender-neutral: “men and women make different uses of any service—transport, water, housing, health care—and have different needs with regard to it.” Another conclusion was that gender-responsiveness issues differ from one service to another. Participants also stressed the ongoing importance of organization and mobilization in working toward gender-responsive services (One World Action 2001: 83).

The Municipal Services Project (MSP), based at Queens University, is another initiative that is developing a gender focus. The project, which is funded by IDRC, is a research effort involving the University of the Witwatersrand, Queen's University, the International Labour Resource and Information Group in Cape Town, the South African Municipal Workers Union, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees. It examines the restructuring of municipal services in Southern Africa, looking at the impacts of decentralization, privatization, cost recovery and community participation on the delivery of basic services to the rural and urban poor. In October 2001, the MSP embarked on a Gender Project, which is working on research on the gendered aspects of service decentralization and privatization (MSP website).

## **i. Gender and decentralization in health**

Health sector reforms have been carried out almost all over the world over the past two decades. Some critics argue that these reforms, largely driven by the international financial institutions and major donors, are “narrowly conceived” in terms of promoting cost-effectiveness and efficiency (Chen and Berlinguer 2001: 41), and that they may reduce the access of poor people to health services (Stocker et. al. 1999, quoted in Chen and Berlinguer). While health sector reform involves a variety of changes, institutionally it is often associated with some form of decentralization in the management and delivery of services, including privatization. The decentralization of health services sometimes involves devolution to local political institutions, but more often involves administrative deconcentration or delegation from central ministries of health. In the context of ongoing political decentralization, this can raise issues of co-ordination between the national government, subnational units of the central government, and local governments. The fate of programmes or services tailored specifically to women may be significantly affected by the arrangements and relationships between these various levels of government.

Standing notes that equity risks related to health services decentralization involve interregional equity, intra-regional equity (i.e. the dominance of local elites), and the fear that decentralization places a greater cost burden on the local community. From a positive perspective, possible benefits of decentralization of health systems—and especially the involvement of—may stem from attempts to give communities greater control over the allocation of health resources and the design of health services, especially through participatory institutions such as local health committees. A study in rural China found that under a decentralized healthcare system, townships failed to invest in health, the quality of care declined, and patients increasingly turned to alternative, private services (Tang and Bloom 2000). It is also reasonable to hypothesize that in such systems, which appear to be under stress, women’s needs may fall to the back of the line. These potential risks and benefits can be expected to have gender-differentiated impacts on men and women, given women’s different and greater needs for health care, as well as the material and political effects of gender inequalities (Ostline, George and Sen 2001: 176). Yet the gender implications of decentralization in health have received little attention (Standing 2000).

A case study from urban Senegal points out that equal access and participation in health care management for women are limited by women’s exclusion from local politics, civil society, and the local health committees (Foley 2001). A 1993 study in Bamako similarly found that women did not participate in local health committees (Hanson and McPake 1993 cited in Standing 1997). There is also evidence that local community bodies may favour curative services, especially drug dispensing (LaFond 1995, Tipping and Segall 1995 cited in Standing 1997) over other services which may be of more value to women. Given the likelihood that men and elites will dominate such local health committees, it is reasonable to hypothesize that women’s health priorities may be neglected in decentralized systems.

One of the few studies that has been carried out in this area looks at reproductive health services. The study found that conservative attitudes at the local level, as well as a lack of budget resources, have meant that national policies on reproductive health are often not implemented locally (Aitken 1998, quoted in Standing 2000). A study on the reproductive health rights implications of health sector reform—including decentralization—in Zambia found lack of resources, problems with user fees, problems of co-ordination between different levels in the decentralized system, and lack of skilled staff were amongst the obstacles to implementation (Nanda 1998). One recent initiative seeking to fill the gap in research on gender and health sector reform is a project of the Washington-based Centre for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE). CHANGE has recently completed a multi-country research project on the implications of health sector reforms on reproductive health and rights, looking at cases in India and Tanzania (Consultation with Hilary Standing, Priya Nanda).

Another issue in health decentralization (and relevant to other sectors as well) is the prevalence of Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAPs), under which donors pursue a single national strategy in co-ordination with the central government. SWAPs have the potential to undermine the effectiveness of local tailoring and local popular participation in areas such as health services, by promoting “re-centralization” (Toonen 2002). On the other hand, because SWAPs are intended to promote co-ordination amongst donors and with other sectors in the national government (Hutton 2002: 8), they also offer opportunities to ensure that health sector reform in general—and decentralized aspects in particular—respond to national gender equality goals that might be the purview of national “women’s machineries.” Yet although most SWAPs take a gender mainstreaming approach to dealing with gender equality, the approach faces many obstacles. In addition, according to the Royal Tropical Institute in the Netherlands, it is difficult for women’s groups in civil society—especially local groups—to represent their interests in negotiations amongst government and donors (Martin 2001).

## **2. Gender and local resource management**

The management of natural resources—such as water and forests—is another area in which there has been a great deal of experimentation with decentralized management in recent years. Community resource management is seen as a means of ensuring equitable, sustainable and efficient management of such resources as forests and water. But critics have pointed out that all of these supposed benefits of community management are undermined by their frequent failure to include women as equal participants (Agarwal 2003). A World Resources Institute study of experiences in South East Asia notes that the low participation of women in decision-making is “a persistent challenge to inclusive local process” in decentralized management of natural resources. Because women play important roles relating to natural resource use, “the exclusion of women’s voices from local decision-making...robs these processes of some of the richest natural resources management experience and perspectives available” (Dupar and Badenoch 2002: 44). Research also supports the view that women have a special relationship to the urban environment and often take primary responsibility for its management through informally-organized systems. The management of the urban environment is therefore

another area that has received some attention from a gender perspective (Consultations with Richard Stren, Virginia MacLaren).

#### **IV. A Research Agenda in Gender and Decentralization**

##### ***A. A conceptual framework: Gender, citizenship and entitlement in decentralized governance***

The Gender Unit's thematic umbrella, "gender, citizenship and entitlement," provides a helpful framework within which to situate the research competition—and the research competition provides an excellent opportunity to explore concrete expressions of this theme. The notions of citizenship and rights have emerged in the past decade as a fruitful approach to conceptualizing the relationship between people and development. Emma Jones and John Gaventa associate the rise of the citizenship discourse with the increasingly political interpretation of "participation" in development on the one hand, and the rise of the "good governance" agenda on the other. Taken together, the notions of citizenship and rights tend to pose development issues in ways that put their political aspects in the foreground. Framed in terms of citizenship rights, the satisfaction of material need and the access to effective participation become political claims. Development is thus transformed from a primarily technical problem to be managed by "experts," into a primarily political process to be demanded, negotiated, shared and created by individuals and groups exercising their agency as citizens.

The terms "citizenship" and "rights," as they are employed in the development context, push their meanings beyond the confines of classical western liberal political theory. In classical liberal theory, citizenship is defined mainly as a legal category that establishes the relationship between the individual and the nation-state. The notion of citizenship in this tradition gives priority to civil and political rights, and emphasizes "negative freedoms" that guarantee the protection of individual autonomy. With the rise of the modern welfare-state in the post-World War II period, especially following the work of T.H. Marshall, social rights were added to civil and political rights as part of the collection of citizenship entitlements, but negative freedoms retained their priority and a sharp distinction continued to be drawn between social, and civil and political rights (Abusharaf 2002: 1-2; Jones and Gaventa 2002).

The contemporary citizenship discourse that informs much current debate in development—especially from a gender perspective—is critical of these liberal formulations (Jones and Gaventa 2002). Moving beyond the individual's freedom and the individual's relationship to the nation-state, some theorists have emphasized instead how people's identities are experienced through the web of overlapping communal relationships. Others have emphasized citizenship as "agency"—active participation in public affairs. There is also growing interest in citizenship in relation to a variety of arenas other than the nation-state, from the community to the global. A central concern in many of these critical approaches is to highlight the ways in which social and civil-political rights are interdependent (Abusharaf 2002: 2-3). The argument, essentially, is that individuals and groups can only ensure their access to basic social entitlements such as health care if they are able to express and enforce their claims through the exercise of

political rights. The exercise of political rights, in turn, depends on the protection of civil rights. Meanwhile, the capacity to exercise political rights and take advantage of civil freedoms is highly dependent on access to social entitlements, since those who are engaged in permanent struggle for basic survival are unlikely to have the time or energy to participate in politics, nor the power resources to make their participation effective.

Feminist thinkers have developed their own approaches to theoretical debates about citizenship, emphasizing the gendered construction of definitions and experiences of citizenship. Some “radical feminists and care theorists tend to dismiss rights as merely the expression of male values and power” (Abusharaf 2002: 3). However, other thinkers and activists have begun to employ the notions of citizenship and rights as a powerful tool for defending women’s claims to have their material and strategic needs met. As Kathleen Canning and Sonya Rose write, “[h]aving uncovered the ideologies and exclusions of gender at the heart of civil society and liberal democracy, feminist scholars have more recently sought to render citizenship a useful category of social analysis” (Canning and Rose 2001: 430).

In the context of decentralization, these expanded notions of citizenship take on very concrete aspects at the local level. As we have seen, the locality is increasingly identified as a key space for politics and development. In decentralized and decentralizing regimes, and especially in cases that involve some degree of political devolution, local governments become the most proximate arena for engagement with the state, as key managers or mediators of local development, and as the level of the state with direct responsibility for the delivery of basic services, the management of local resources. Citizenship, understood not simply as an abstract characteristic, but as an active category that is made concrete through political participation, social membership, and access to social entitlements, is experienced very directly at the local level.

Contemporary gender analysis employs the notions of practical gender needs and strategic gender interests. Practical needs are defined in terms of day-to-day necessities stemming from women’s specific gender roles, including items such as health care, child care, food security, and personal safety. Strategic interests, on the other hand, are longer term benefits that women need in order to change unequal and oppressive gender relations in society, and include items such as education, mobilization, legal rights, and political participation (Moser 1989; Parpart et. al. 2000). Women’s experiences as “local citizens,” engaged in struggles to advance both their practical needs and strategic interests, have immediate implications for the quality of their lives—and the quality of development more generally. By exploring the gender dimensions of decentralization, we can ask how decentralization shapes—and *is shaped by*—women’s experiences as local citizens.

### ***B. General principles for designing research projects***

The following principles emerged out of the research and consultations conducted for this paper. They are not specific research topics, but rather recommendations about cross-cutting issues and approaches to consider in the design of research projects.

**1) Emphasize women's access to services and resources:** Many of those who were consulted during the preparation of this paper stressed the importance of approaching research on the gender dimensions of decentralization from the point of view of women's practical needs—and in particular in terms of their access to services and resources at the local level. The research agenda for the GU competition should be framed around the question of how decentralization, in concrete instances, shapes gendered experiences and practices of local citizenship with respect to access to and control over services and resources for development. Questions of governance are crucial, but can be explored as they relate to such questions as whether decentralized healthcare services meet women's health needs, whether women are at a disadvantage in gaining access to local natural resources under decentralized systems, whether decentralization of school management makes education more accessible and appropriate for girls, or whether participatory planning and budgeting processes result in resource allocations that give priority to the gender-specific needs of women, etc.

**2) Consider cases that will facilitate comparative analysis:** As noted above, an enormous diversity of processes and contexts are involved in decentralization reforms. In order to facilitate comparative analysis based on the research (assuming that a comparative study might be produced, or a workshop held to share and discuss results), it will be necessary for the research to pay close attention to the specific institutional arrangements that characterize the decentralized systems under study, and to the specific political, historical and cultural contexts. Other ways of facilitating comparative analysis would be to limit the research to cases that share certain basic characteristics. For example, research could be confined to cases of political decentralization, to cases where the primary focus or starting point is the local level (such as the municipality or rural local authority) rather than an intermediate level such as regional or state government, or to decentralization in a specific sector, such as health or education. Another possibility would be to confine the research to urban or rural cases only, or to a selected number of countries, or to one or two regions.

**3) Link empirical research to theoretical analysis:** A number of those who were consulted during the preparation of this paper emphasized the need to go beyond “received notions” of decentralization as promoted by the development establishment. (This was a message that emerged out of the UNIFEM/WAVE workshop on decentralization, as well.) They stressed that research on the gender dimensions of decentralization offers an opportunity for creative work on reconceptualizing states, institutions and governance from a gender perspective. The GU research competition can contribute to this conceptual project in two ways: on the one hand, by examining in concrete instances the gender dimensions and impacts of ongoing decentralization processes and decentralized systems of governance; and on the other hand by searching for and investigating decentralized mechanisms and processes through which gendered visions of development and governance can be advanced. In other words, there is a need for research that considers how decentralization affects women, but there is also a need for research on how women can affect decentralization to further the overall goal of just, sustainable, gender-responsive development. These research agendas can and should be integrated and both require careful empirical work at the local level, as well as

comparative analysis. However, the second agenda, in particular, also requires an element of imaginative thinking. The research projects carried out under the GU competition should therefore be firmly grounded in local realities, but should be designed with a view to contributing to conceptual innovation.

**4) Take fiscal arrangements and budgetary issues into account:** The literature on decentralization, as well as the scoping exercise, confirmed that the financing of decentralized systems is crucial. No matter how genuinely participatory local governance may be, if local government lacks the financial resources to fund its mandates, the participation will be ineffective. If central authorities control how resource transfers are allocated, then decisionmaking at the local level will have limited impact. By the same token, central control over local spending decisions can mitigate the effects of elite capture or ensure the implementation of national policies—such as gender equality. The extent to which decentralization relies on local resource mobilization through user fees or voluntary labour, or leads directly to privatization, is also significant. From a gender perspective, there are many questions to be raised about fiscal issues. Does the central government provide funds for the implementation of gender policies and programmes at the local level? If there are national programmes for women—such as maternal and child health programmes—who funds them? Are programmes for women protected by central funding or earmarked transfers to local government? Does political devolution leave local governments free to divert resources away from issues of special concern to women? Gendered budget analysis provides one useful approach to dealing with these issues.

### *C. Promising topics and questions for research*

The following themes and research questions emerged out of the consultations and survey of initiatives carried out as part of the scoping exercise, as well as from an analysis of the issues that appeared in the literature review. They reflect the topics that were most frequently cited in the literature and consultations. A few other themes and questions also emerged, but those below appear to be the most relevant, as well as presenting the elements for a coherent research agenda.

It should be noted that although the suggestions for research topics are presented separately, there is a great deal of overlap between them, and it would be possible—and even desirable—to design research that considered two or all of the topics together. Finally, it is important to emphasize that since decentralization ultimately has to do with what happens locally, the most relevant research questions will arise from the local level. The questions identified below, therefore, are fairly general, and are far from exhaustive.

#### **a. Women's political participation at the local level**

Women's political participation in decentralized systems, and especially women in local government, is one area in which a body of research and documented experience already exists, as noted above. However, the scoping exercise made it plain that there is a need for more research in this area—in particular, there is a need for research that goes beyond data on the number of women in local politics to consider the conditions and policy impacts of their participation. There is also room for action-oriented research focusing on what is required at the local level in

order to facilitate women's access to office at the local-level, as well as more gender-responsive local policymaking.

***Sample research questions:***

- What factors influence women's access to participation in formal political institutions at the local level? (e.g. women-friendly electoral systems, active women's organizations, quotas for women, left-of-centre political parties, local political cultures, etc.)
- What is the experience with various kinds of formal and informal quota systems in different cases? What factors condition the effectiveness of women elected through quota systems?
- How representative are the identities of officials elected at the local level, in terms of sex, class, caste, age, religion, ethnicity, education level, etc.?
- How does women's presence in local government affect policy outcomes? How does women's presence in local government affect resource allocation?
- How does women's presence in local government affect political process and style? Do women exhibit different political or leadership styles than their male counterparts? Are women more likely than men to engage in participatory processes with their constituents?
- What issues do locally-elected women pursue, and do these reflect the needs and interests of local women and/or other constituents? What factors (such as party allegiance, class, age, ethnicity, institutional arrangements, etc.) influence the issues and agendas pursued by women in local government?
- What training, information, experience, and support do gender advocates (both women and men) in local government need in order to be more effective in pursuing gender interests in local government? Do elected officials and bureaucrats in local government have access to the information they need to pursue gender-responsive policy and programming?
- What kinds of positive experiences exist at the local level that we can learn from? Are there positive examples of strategies and tools used by women in local government to gain access to the resources they need to participate effectively?

**b. Engendering civil society participation at the local level**

As this paper has indicated, there is a substantial amount of research and activity on the question of women's participation in local government. But decentralization is also supposed to bring the state closer to citizens by creating new opportunities for the participation of civil society at the local level. Therefore, it is also important to question the gendered nature of participatory mechanisms and processes associated with decentralization. Such research may consider how and whether decentralization—both political and administrative—affects the capacity of women and gender advocates in civil society to make their voices heard, affect decision making, and hold officials accountable. This research may also consider how the participation of women and gender advocates in local civil society can affect and shape decentralization and local governance.

***Sample research questions:***

- Have decentralization reforms resulted from pressure from civil society for democratization, local autonomy, or greater responsiveness on the part of the state? Were/are women's organizations or gender advocates involved in pressing for or designing decentralization reforms?
- Are participatory mechanisms (village development councils, citizens' assemblies, participatory planning processes, local health or education committees, etc.) associated with the decentralization reforms? How do women and women's organizations in civil society gain access to these arenas?
- Are there quotas or other mechanisms in place to facilitate women's access to participatory mechanisms and processes? What is the impact of these mechanisms in terms of ensuring equal participation for women, and gender-responsive policies and services locally?
- What relationships exist between elected women and women's and gender advocacy organizations in civil society? Are there alliances between elected officials or local bureaucrats (men or women), and gender advocates in civil society? How are these alliances cultivated and nourished? What are their concrete results?
- What strategies have women's organizations and gender advocates in civil society used successfully to pursue their demands vis à vis local authorities and other levels of government in decentralized systems?
- What is the nature of the civil society "organizational landscape" as it relates to women and gender issues? Are there local women's groups or gender advocacy organizations? Who belongs to them? What are their agendas and interests in relation to local government and local authorities?
- Are women active, and are gender interests represented, in influential local civil society organizations, such as NGOs, religious organizations, community groups, etc.?

**c. Gender implications of intergovernmental relations and co-ordination**

Many of those consulted during the scoping exercise—as well as much of the literature on decentralization—emphasized that intergovernmental relations are a key variable in decentralization. From a gender perspective, one important issue in this regard is the role of the so-called “national machineries for women” (Bell et. al. 2000). Despite facing many obstacles to effectiveness, these machineries are nevertheless critical advocates for gender concerns within government, and it is worth asking what becomes of these agencies, bureaus or ministries in decentralization processes. A related question is how national gender policies and programmes for women fare in decentralized systems. While decentralization is expected to make government and services more responsive to local needs—including those of women—it may also dilute national commitments to gender equality and gender sensitive policies and programmes. Yet, even under systems with minimal decentralization, national gender policies may not be implemented at the local level, and feminist organizations may be concentrated in capital cities and poorly linked to poor women in smaller centres or rural areas.

Decentralization therefore raises the question of what kind of gender advocacy activities are most effective at which levels of government.

***Sample research questions:***

- What level of government has responsibility for ensuring that national gender policies and programmes are implemented at the local level in decentralized systems? Who monitors their implementation? Are there accountability mechanisms?
- Are there local machineries for women and local gender policies and programmes? Are there financial, human and political resources available to support these? How do they relate to national institutions?
- Are women—particularly poor and otherwise marginalized women—and their organizations in civil society at the local level aware of national institutions, policies and programmes related to women and gender issues? Are these national institutions, policies and programmes linked to local women’s community groups and gender advocacy organizations? Do national women’s networks include grassroots women and their concerns?
- Do local politicians and officials, and national officials with responsibility for decentralization issues, have access to gender training?
- Are gender issues considered in the design of decentralization reforms? Are they considered in the design of all the components of decentralization reforms (e.g. not only in designing participatory processes, but also in designing fiscal decentralization, assigning expenditure responsibilities to different tiers of government, etc.)
- How are gender equality issues dealt with in national planning and donor co-operation strategies, such as PRSPs and SWAPs? How are the gender aspects of these national strategies implemented locally? How is the participation of local women integrated into such national strategies?
- What kind of fiscal mechanisms accompany decentralization, and what is their impact on gender-responsive expenditures?

***d. Women’s access to services and resources in decentralized systems***

Access to services and resources for development is in many ways the bottom line for assessing the impacts of decentralization. Whether the emphasis is on enhancing democratic citizenship or making service delivery more responsive and efficient, the ultimate test is whether the lives of poor people improve as a result of greater access to more appropriate services and increased access to and control over resources for development. For women, whose frequently occupy subordinate positions in both the private and public spheres the issue of access especially important. As we have seen, decentralization is sometimes viewed as little more than a “cover” for the retreat of the state from its social functions, which are increasingly being turned over to the private sector. Gender advocates argue that women often fare worst in this situation. At the same time, to the extent that decentralization creates opportunities for women—and other vulnerable groups—to exercise more control over the design and provision of services and the management of resources, it may offer benefits. Nearly all of the consultations

indicated that the issue of how decentralization affects women's access to specific services and resources is a key topic for research. The competition could make a valuable contribution by sponsoring investigations of the links between women's access to and participation in decentralized governance institutions and the appropriateness and accessibility of decentralized services, or local resource management. Research on the decentralization of healthcare might be particularly promising because there is substantial literature upon which to build in the area of health sector reform as well as gender and health, but little research focuses specifically on gender dimensions of decentralization in health. Education, water, and other sector decentralizations would also be relevant.

***Sample research questions:***

- Who participates in local health committees (education committees, resource management groups, etc.) and other decision making arenas relating to health (or other) services (or resources)? What factors influence women's participation in these organizations and processes? How representative are the women who participate, in terms of age, class, caste, religion, ethnicity, etc.?
- How well are women's needs met by various decentralized modes of service delivery, including private health services? Does local decisionmaking in this area reflect women's needs and preferences? Do women and men differ in their use of various services at the local level? Do women and men from different sociocultural groups, or in different age categories, have different needs, and are these reflected in the services?
- Who makes decisions about the allocation of resources for health (or other services or resources) at the local level?
- Are gender concerns included in the design of decentralized health (or education or other services) at the national and subnational levels? Where responsibility for service provision is shared amongst local and other levels of government, at what level are gender concerns dealt with most effectively?
- Do local officials responsible for decentralized services in health (or other areas) have access to pertinent, gender-disaggregated information about the characteristics and needs of the local population? What information do they need to design gender-responsive services, and how can they get it?
- Which level of government controls resource allocation for women's health services?
- How well are gender concerns mainstreamed in donor SWAP interventions in health (or other sectors)? What access do local women's and gender organizations in civil society have to the design of SWAPs?
- What kinds of resources and processes have been successful in ensuring that women's specific needs are met in decentralized health care (or other) systems?

## **V. Conclusions**

The literature review, scoping exercise, and analysis that inform this paper confirm that IDRC's Gender Unit can make a valuable contribution to knowledge, policy and advocacy by sponsoring research on the theme of Gender and Decentralization. Research

and initiatives specifically oriented at exploring the gender dimensions of decentralization are currently scarce—which is surprising in view of the well-documented and widely-recognized importance of both themes. Nonetheless, a critical mass of research, thinking and action in areas that are related to the theme, provide a solid base for further work. The growing interest in this area on the part of major donors and international organizations (for example, the World Bank Institute’s new Gender and Decentralization project) also offers “policy windows” for GU-supported research.

This paper outlines a number of key issues in decentralization that seem particularly relevant from a gender perspective, and points to a number of promising approaches and topics for research. While it would be productive to follow up any of these areas, the strongest recommendation of this background paper is that the research conducted through the Gender Unit competition should begin by engaging with the concrete impacts of decentralization for women, in terms of their access to decentralized services or resources. Additional recommendations include the following: that the research should consider these issues within a framework that analyzes the gendered nature of local citizenship, understood in terms of political participation and social entitlement; explore how women’s roles in decentralized governance affect their access to services; consider how the findings on local experiences can inform new conceptualizations of decentralization; and finally, actively seek practices, tools, strategies and experiences that have the promise of making tangible contributions to struggles for to advance women’s well-being and empowerment.

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## **Annex A: Internal Consultations**

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## **Annex C: Resources on the Internet**

### **The Asian Resource Center for Decentralization**

[www.decentralization.ws/default.asp](http://www.decentralization.ws/default.asp)

### **FAO Technical Consultation on Decentralization**

[www.fao.org/SD/ROdirect/ROfo0000.htm](http://www.fao.org/SD/ROdirect/ROfo0000.htm)

Links to many useful papers on decentralization, especially in relation to rural development

### **Gender Responsive Budget Initiatives**

[www.gender-budgets.org](http://www.gender-budgets.org)

A joint UNIFEM and Commonwealth Secretariat project, with funding from IDRC. Links to papers and project information.

### **The High-Level Inter-American Network on Decentralization, Local Government and Citizen Participation (RIAD)**

[www.upd.oas.org/riad/](http://www.upd.oas.org/riad/)

### **Institute of Development Studies (IDS Sussex) Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability**

Links to workshops, conferences, research notes and articles.

[www2.ids.ac.uk/drcitizen/themes/theme1.htm](http://www2.ids.ac.uk/drcitizen/themes/theme1.htm)

### **Learning Initiative on Citizen Participation Local Governance**

[www.ids.ac.uk/logolink/](http://www.ids.ac.uk/logolink/)

A global research and exchange programme, funded by the Ford Foundation and based at IDS Sussex. The site provides links to research and initiatives in this area.

### **The Online Sourcebook on Decentralization and Local Development**

[http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/Entryway/issues\\_list.html](http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/Entryway/issues_list.html)

Sponsored by the World Bank, Swiss Agency for Development Co-operation, FAO, UNDP and GTZ, provides basic information on key issues related to decentralization (not including gender)

### **Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), The Netherlands: Gender and Decentralization**

Resources and links related to gender and decentralization

[www.kit.nl/specials/html/de\\_gender\\_decentralization.asp](http://www.kit.nl/specials/html/de_gender_decentralization.asp)

### **Swiss Tropical Institute**

Links to papers on decentralization compiled by the STI

[www.sti.ch.scih/swap\\_references\\_decentralisation.htm](http://www.sti.ch.scih/swap_references_decentralisation.htm)

### **World Bank Institute: Decentralization Briefing Notes**

A useful primer on various aspects of decentralization, from a World Bank perspective

<http://www1.worldbank.org/wbiep/decentralization/africa/RD3.pdf>

### **World Bank Institute: Gender, Decentralization and Public Finance**

Links to articles on a number of relevant topics, including gender responsive budgeting and women in local government

[www.worldbank.org/wbi/publicfinance/decentralization/gender.htm#initiatives](http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/publicfinance/decentralization/gender.htm#initiatives)