Decentralization, Women’s Rights and Development

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Introduction

Much of the enthusiasm for decentralisation and for enhancing the powers and responsibilities of local units of government is based on the idea that they are closer to the people that the state is supposed to serve. Judith Tendler characterises the position thus: ‘greater proximity makes government more vulnerable to citizen pressures, and makes it easier for citizens to become more informed and hence more demanding of good service’ (Tendler, 1997:144). From such arguments it is often swiftly imputed that the global trend towards the decentralization of public roles, resources and responsibilities is also good for women. The logic is as follows: because prevailing gender relations in most parts of the world continue to see women as responsible for the domestic sphere, women are more likely to be concerned with things homebound and local. As such, decentralisation is often regarded as an important vehicle for increasing women’s representation and advancing women’s rights. The reality, however, is not so clear-cut. First, localisation has its limits and there is reason to believe that effective voice and distributive policies are better exercised at national level. Second, even where the benefits of decentralisation can be clearly demonstrated, it is not guaranteed that these are extended to women. Third, ‘women’ constitute a heterogeneous constituency and even where decentralisation has benefits in terms of advancing gender equity, these do not necessarily extend to all categories of women with similar effect.

Similarly, those concerned with gender equality and women’s rights have welcomed the adoption by development agencies of rights-based approaches (RBAs). Two main arguments as to why RBAs are good for women have been put forward (AWID, 2002).

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1 This paper was commissioned by the Women’s Rights and Citizenship program of the International Development Centre (Ottawa, Canada), for presentation and discussion at the FLACSO-IDRC International Workshop on Decentralisation and Women’s Rights held from 27th to 31st August 2006 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. I wish to acknowledge and thank the participants for their helpful comments and feedback on an earlier version of this paper.
The first is that the norm of gender equality is embedded in rights-based approaches because equality and non-discrimination are central to human rights conventions. The second is that RBAs focus on the socially marginalised, making women a natural constituency. A danger with this latter assumption is that it uncritically links women’s rights and social marginalisation, which in turn potentially repeats the problems identified by Jackson (1996, 1999) in relation to poverty and social exclusion. Recognising these as related but not synonymous dimensions of social disadvantage, Jackson argues that they are not equivalent to gender oppression, as women’s subordination derives from other relational dynamics, albeit often associated with poverty and exclusion, that can affect women across all social groups. Other cautionary notes include Uvin’s (2004) concern that RBAs may be little more than a development fad and Tsikata’s (2004:132) related call for a feminist interrogation of what may be just ‘another instalment of contestation within gender and development’.

That said, there is both heuristic and policy value in bringing decentralisation and rights-based approaches together. Whether or not we like the rights discourse or a preoccupation with ‘localisation’, these are important concepts currently informing development thinking and practice. As such, this paper seeks to interrogate these approaches, understand why they hold such contemporary appeal and discern if and how they benefit women. The paper highlights some of the paradoxes of decentralisation for women and shows how these dilemmas link to women’s rights. It discusses the current endorsement of RBAs in development and how this articulates with the advancement of gender equality at the local level. The paper concludes by arguing that advancing women’s rights cannot be left to the local level. Concomitantly, holding right-bearers to account at supra-local levels becomes difficult without locally embedded democratic practice and nationally connected accountability mechanisms. When these dimensions are in place, the strengths of rights-based approaches serve to cancel out the limitations of decentralisation, while a focus on decentralisation can help advance the rights agenda to a greater concern with socio-economic rights. Such articulation and reinforcement can have positive spin offs in relation to women’s rights and political participation at local level.
Rights-based Approaches and Women’s Rights

Rights-based approaches (RBAs) attempt to integrate the norms, standards and principles of the international human rights system into the policies and processes of development (Moser and Norton, 2001). Human rights are commonly understood as being those rights that are inherent in a human being and that are legally guaranteed by human rights law. They are enshrined in treaties, declarations, guidelines and principles that have been agreed under the auspices of the United Nations since 1945 (DFID, 2000). Closely related but not synonymous are RBAs, which constitute conceptual and operational frameworks for advancing international human rights standards (United Nations, 2003). Linking Sen’s understanding of human development as the expansion of human freedoms to the notion of human rights has served to tie the process of development to the ‘idea that others have duties to facilitate or enhance human development’ (Moser and Norton, 2001). As such, development workers use RBAs to get governments and other duty bearers such as international development agencies to improve their performance and be accountable for rights violations (O’Neill, 2003). This institutional dimension of rights-based approaches allows for the calibration of normative frameworks of obligations with efforts to enhance democratic governance. The key elements of a rights-based approach are outlined in Table One below.

RBAs are accompanied by controversy. In the nature of normative approaches, cultural relativists argue that they advance as universal, norms that are highly influenced by western values. Those who assume a legalistic or political definition of rights see them as the responsibility of governments alone and point to the futility of trying to enforce them in an international development context. Advocates of broader rights-based approaches, however, claim that they provide for clarity of principle in development work. In

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2 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948 and subsequently reaffirmed in 1993. Along with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, it constitutes the International Bill of Rights. Over 160 countries have ratified one or both of these covenants, so they are binding in most places. Other treaties crucial to development practitioners include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention against Racial Discrimination, all of which have been ratified by a majority of governments.
addition, RBAs draw on a range of international instruments, treaties and conventions that provide an authoritative set of international standards against which processes and outcomes can be judged. Furthermore, as such treaties and conventions have been supported and agreed upon by a majority of countries, they are as universal as is possible.

Table 1: Key Elements of Rights-based Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Features</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>An express linkage to rights</em></td>
<td>• The objectives of development are framed in terms of particular rights, as legally enforceable entitlements.                                                                                              • This is seen to give added weight to development goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A high level of accountability</em></td>
<td>• A central focus on raising levels of accountability in the development process by identifying claim holders (and their entitlements) and corresponding duty-holders (and their obligations).                                                                 • In this way, development moves from the realm of charity to obligation.                                                                 • Obligation is seen to include both positive obligations, to protect, promote and provide, as well as negative obligations, to abstain from violations.                                                                 • Not only the state but the full range of development actors are held accountable and subject to rights-based standards, including local organisations and authorities, private companies, aid donors and international institutions                                                                 • As rights are legally enforceable, such an approach encourages the development of a more rigorous framework for monitoring implementation and sanction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>An explicit focus on capabilities and empowerment</em></td>
<td>• The focus is on empowerment and capabilities rather than welfare and need, on users with rights rather than beneficiaries of aid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A high level of participation</em></td>
<td>• Rights come with responsibility and the approach is premised on the understanding that development can only be achieved with a high level of meaningful (not formal or ceremonial) participation from affected communities.</td>
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*Source: Beall, Lewis and Sutherland, 2003*
RBAs are generally associated quite closely with issues relating to gender equity. Here a strictly legal approach to rights is not considered helpful to women, especially poor women who have little access to lawyers and courts and who are not necessarily assisted by an approach to rights that ignores their economic, social and political disadvantage. RBAs, by contrast, tend to champion the socio-economic rights of poor and marginal social groups and women (Tsikata, 2004:131). That said, neither women’s legal rights nor their economic, social and political rights have been advanced more effectively in the context of a rights focus than in the various approaches to gender and development that preceded this approach. Molyneux and Razavi (2004:3-4) put this down to the ambivalent character of the neoliberal policy agenda in development and the serious social consequences of this agenda for poor women in developing countries:

The gap between global principles and outcomes is particularly striking in the case of gender equality, women’s rights and access to decision-making power: for all the advances noted earlier, these have been modest when judged against the standard of equality. Faced with this record, many have come to question the significance of the much-heralded global turn to democracy and human rights.

Similar arguments have been made in relation to decentralisation with suggestions that this too is simply a ‘sweetener for the bitter pill of neo-liberal adjustment and rising inequality’ (Molyneux and Razavi, 2004:4) and that the cultivation of democracy through the promotion of localisation is ‘little more than empty rhetoric with little content or effect’. It is this question that the paper now addresses.

Local Politics and Decentralisation

From the early 1980s, decentralisation became integral to international development policy, as articulated for example by the World Bank (Rondinelli et al, 1983, World Bank 1997). The term has been applied to extremely diverse forms of restructuring, making decentralisation difficult to define. By the mid-1990s, 80 per cent of countries, with very different political dispensations, were engaged in some form of decentralisation (Crook
and Manor 2000). Over ten years ago an Urban Management Programme publication claimed that ‘of the 75 developing and transitional countries with populations greater than five million, all but 12 claim to be embarked on some form of transfer of political power to local units of government’ (Dillinger, 1994:vii). Despite its very widespread incidence, the rationale for decentralisation, the manner in which it has been implemented and the level of success or failure in each case has differed so enormously that assessing its overall legacy is difficult.

The umbrella concept ‘decentralisation’ is often broken down into three or four sub-categories in order to clarify the phenomenon. The simplest and most well known typology is probably Rondinelli’s (1981) three-way distinction between deconcentration, delegation and devolution. Deconcentration refers to cases where central government separates out responsibilities for particular services to regional branch offices, thereby geographically dispersing the apparatus of central government itself, without any transfer of authority to lower tiers of government. Delegation by contrast, relates to the transferring of responsibility for decision-making and administration of public functions to other organisations that have semi-independent authority and ‘are not wholly controlled by the central government but are ultimately accountable to it’ (Rondinelli et al, 1989:75-76). Devolution is a more extensive form of decentralisation that refers to the actual transfer of authority to lower tiers of government, with local governments being given autonomy with respect to decision-making and financial management. These decentralised authorities have clear legal geographical boundaries within which they exercise authority and perform public functions. This now familiar framing gave rise to a primarily administrative understanding of decentralisation.

Indeed, international policy pundits initially justified decentralisation policies in purely administrative terms, on the grounds that state-run services in developing countries were in decline. It was argued that by breaking down government into smaller units and by entering into multi-sector partnerships, delivery would become more effective and efficient. The international political climate at the time was preoccupied with the failure of socialism and central planning in the former Soviet Union. Given the accompanying
enthusiasm for market-driven approaches the reasoning was seen as self-evident. For example, Rondinelli et al (1989) added two further sub-categories of decentralisation to their typology: privatisation and the deregulation of private service provision. As the 1990s progressed, the rationale for decentralisation shifted towards a championing of local institutions and governance. The emphasis moved from an obsession with ‘rolling back the state’ to one concerned with ‘bringing the state back in’ but under a central condition, that of decentralisation. This was made most explicit in the 1997 World Development Report (World Bank, 1997: 98) where it was acknowledged that there had been ‘an over-withdrawal of the state’ and that to a certain extent government could be ‘reterritorialized’ at the local level. Belief in the inherent qualities of localised vis-à-vis centralised government was uncritically accepted. As Tendler (1997) has argued, the inefficiency and rigidity of central government, as well as the responsiveness of local government were assumed to be intrinsic by a neoliberal global policy agenda and it was this that came to constitute a fundamental weakness of a purely administrative decentralisation approach.

It was in this context that a broader consensus developed around decentralisation having an explicitly democratising function that would render government more responsive and citizens more engaged (Ostrom et al. 1993; Manor, 1999; Putnam 1993). A focus on the prospects for local democracy in development policy debates coincided with a focus by academics on the localisation of political action at a time when power was being seen to concentrate at the global level (Cox, 1997; Mohan and Stokke, 2000). At the same time, progressive global politics, as exhibited for example through the World Social Forums, trained its gaze on local level struggles and how these might best be linked to global campaigns for social justice. Hence, placing value on local politics was a trend that came to span a wide ideological terrain as Harriss et al (2005:1) have pointed out:

The dominantly liberal discourse emanating from the World Bank is one powerful voice expressing this idea, but there are remarkably comparable views being articulated by intellectuals who may be described as ‘post-structuralists’. Meanwhile there are significant thinkers and activists from the left who advocate
what appear to be similar ideas. All these groups of actors share a conception of the vitalisation of democracy (or the establishment of more meaningful alternatives to it) through popular participation in local public spheres.

It was in this context that the notions of *democratic decentralisation* gained currency. However, there are a number of critics who are circumspect about the prospect of local politics delivering democracy. For example, Heller (2000) argues that there are no *a priori* reasons why more localized forms of governance are more accountable and many, such as indirect rule under colonialism are decidedly undemocratic. Mohan and Stokke (2000:255) have suggested that localism serves powerful and global interests well in that it casts communities in the ‘non-threatening language of trust, networks, reciprocity and associations’. And Harriss (2002) has pointed out that in the context of development, when organisations such as the World Bank takes up the issue of localism, for example through the language of social capital, this can be deeply depoliticising. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to associate democratic decentralisation with more progressive political forces and administrative decentralisation with the efficiency agendas of neoliberal policies.

In fact a more nuanced perspective is called for and this is provided in part by the typology of decentralisation provided by Litvack et al (2001). Their categorisation is based on the functions of the state that are decentralised. They see *political decentralisation* as relating to the extent to which political institutions and policy decisions reflect the multiplicity of citizen interests. For them, *administrative decentralisation* refers to how responsible political institutions turn the resultant policy decisions into outcomes. Their concept of *fiscal decentralisation* refers to lower tiers of government setting and collecting taxes, making particular expenditures and rectifying ‘vertical imbalances’ between revenue collection and public spending. Ultimately Litvack et al, conclude that whatever the political and fiscal arrangements, the actual delivery of public services depends on effective administrative decentralisation, which is in turn evidence of government accountability. This is useful, although the analytical centre of gravity from the perspective of *democratic decentralisation* (as opposed to political
decentralisation) would be as much on the capacity and opportunity of citizens, civil society organisations and women’s movements to hold government to account. As such, both sides of the accountability coin are important with regard to the service delivery interests of poor people, the associated resource dimensions and how these are addressed in relation to women’s political participation. Nevertheless, this tripartite framework of decentralisation is helpful when drawing connections to the issue of women’s rights.

**Decentralisation and Women’s Rights**

Feminist political theory is animated by the politics of the body, the family and various understandings of how difference and identity articulate with spaces of power and access to resources (Fraser, 1997; Phillips, 1990, 1999; Young, 1990, 2000). These ideas have informed studies of gendered citizenship (Lister, 1997; Kabeer, 2005; Yuval-Davis and Werbner, 1996), as well as women’s relationship with the state in the global South (Goetz and Hassim, 2003; Hassim, 2006; Rai, 1996; Randall and Waylen, 1998). They have also influenced feminist analyses of development and how it relates to issues of physical and social reproduction, power dynamics within the household, as well as the complicity of the state and development organisations in the construction of gendered and other identities. In other words, gendered analyses of development recognise that political processes operate across wide and deep terrains, which traverse and connect the social and political spheres.\(^3\)

If a strong focus on state society relations is critical to a gendered analysis of decentralisation, so also is a proper understanding of what is particular about the local level. A number of writers on local governance fall prey to one of two analytical errors. The first is to see local politics as a distinct field, worthy of independent and ring-fenced analysis, justified on the grounds that local government has particular responsibilities and

\(^3\) This perspective sits uncomfortably with the argument advanced by Harriss et al (2005:14) that a ‘society-centred perspective’ denies ‘political competition or conflict between different social groups and classes’, in an otherwise compelling volume. For as Nancy Fraser (1989) has suggested we need to shift the critical focus from one preoccupied with conflict over competing interests and need satisfaction, to a more radical politics that combines the politics of redistribution with the politics of recognition and need interpretation.
competencies. While this is quite so, it obscures the links between local level political processes and how these articulate with political spaces and government functions at other levels. The second mistake is to see local politics as simply mirroring the dynamics and preoccupations of national politics (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1992). The problem here is that opportunities to advance women’s rights through using the particular policy, planning and implementation functions of local government can be lost. Hence it is important that the linkages between the local and other political levels are identified and to understand the full range of actors, structures, practices and processes operating both in and on the local level. This approach informs the ensuing analysis of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation as they relate to women’s rights.

*Political Decentralisation: The Democratic Challenge*

The gender and development literature has tended to argue that women are more likely to be politically active at the local level. The reasons offered for why this is so are as follows (Evertzen, 2001:3):

… because eligibility criteria for the local level are less stringent, and local government is the closest to the women’s sphere of life, and easier to combine with rearing children. It can be the first level that women can break into and as such it may serve as a springboard to national politics, by developing capacities and gaining experiences. Likewise local politics can be more interesting to women as they are well acquainted with their community, being the major users of space and services in the local community (water, electricity, waste disposal, health clinics, and other social services). They also participate actively in organisations in their neighbourhood, and it’s easier to involve these organisations in formal political decision making at the local level.

However, ease of entry into local political processes is exaggerated for women and in many contexts, once in office they face tremendous difficulties. One of the reasons why local governance is so often a disappointing arena for women is that it is often responsive
or open to informal institutions and relations of power, which undermine or bypass formal rules and procedures. Women’s historical exclusion from local government means that they do not have access to many of the informal networks that sustain and reproduce the institutions and social practices that make up local governance, institutions and practices that in any case are hostile to or exclusionary of women.

Illustrative here is the importance of chieftaincy in local governance many parts of Africa. Based on male hereditary principles and upholding conventions such as customary law and land rights that are oppressive and exclusionary of women, most chieftaincies are antithetical to gendered local democracy and women’s political and socio-economic rights (Beall, 2005a). Wider analyses focusing on women’s engagement in local politics show that civil society organisations are not necessarily benign or accommodating of women’s political claims and that at the best of times local government is an ambiguous terrain of political engagement for women (Beall, 2005b; Beall and Todes, 2004; Craske, 1998; Gwinnett, 1998; Mbatha, 2003; Rai, 1996; Randall, 1998). Women who enter local politics in leadership positions face a number of risks, ranging from manipulation by existing political parties to ostracism on the part of the community for stepping outside conventional gender roles, in some cases even facing witchcraft allegations. Even when decentralisation is in the form of democratic decentralisation, the conditions under which it is advanced are rarely ideal for women, as Manor (1999:97) has pointed out:

The limited evidence available on the impact of decentralization on women’s interests offers only modest encouragement. It appears that the empowerment of arenas at or near the local level, where prejudices against women are often stronger than at higher levels, may damage their prospects unless provisions are made to give women a meaningful voice. In some systems, some seats on councils are reserved for women nominees. This holds little promise for them, because they tend to be beholden to the male leaders who secured their nomination. Their best hope lies in the reservation of seats for which only women candidates can stand for election, but this appears to have been attempted in only a few places – notably India.
In other words, while local government might be the sphere of governance closest to women’s life concerns, it is also the tier of governance most proximate to peoples’ prejudices and the threat of a backlash against women who raise their heads above the parapet.

There is very little written on women and decentralisation and indeed, there has been a general tendency in recent years to focus on women’s political engagement at the level of the national state. This is evident, for example, in WEDO’s 50/50 campaign\(^4\) and UNRISD’s research programmes concerned with women’s participation and effectiveness in national parliaments (Goetz, 2004; Goet and Hassim, 2002a, 2002b; Molyneux and Razavi, 2006). To the extent that local level politics has been a focus, it has largely been in relation to women’s civil society organisations and movements and how they engage the state at different national levels (Alvarez, 1990; Basu, 1995; Dore and Molyneux, 2000; Howell and Mulligan, 2004; Molyneux, 2000). Hassim’s (2006) analysis of women’s organisations in South Africa makes the important argument that it is not sufficient for women simply to be organised but that then need to be so from the vantage point of a grassroots women’s movement that is not fragmented. Rather it needs to be mobilized and well coordinated if it is to critically engage the state at every level. Hassim (2004) stresses the importance of consolidating the political gains that women at have made at the national level, in terms of constitutional protection, the advancement of women’s rights and political and bureaucratic sites for mainstreaming gender equity. In the context of South Africa and following this lead I have argued that the national level has provided the necessary constitutional and political space for a more robust engagement in local politics on the part of women (Beall, 2005a). However, without strongly rooted political participation by women at the local level, there is a danger that a) the gains made at national level are not sustained and b) national level polices remain no more than empty rhetoric. This is nowhere more evidently the case than in relation to decentralisation and women’s rights policies in many countries around the world.

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\(^4\) Women’s Environment and Development Organ (WEDO) in 2000 launched the 50/50 campaign aimed at increasing women’s political participation in national governments around the world, leading to the launch of 18 national and regional campaigns and some success in increasing the representation of women.
Administrative Decentralisation: Turning Rhetoric into Realisable Rights for Women

Women’s interests, linked as they are to their gendered responsibilities in households and communities, often relate to the provision of local amenities, infrastructure and services. These in turn become policy priorities for women. The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA 1998:1) argued in their position paper on women in local government that:

Local governments traditionally provide services utilized by individual households such as electricity, waste disposal, public transport, water, schools, health clinics and other social services. The decisions of local governments therefore have a direct impact on the private lives of women, because they are traditionally responsible for providing for and caring for the family and the home in many countries.

It is for this reason that effective administrative decentralisation and most particularly local government responsibility for service delivery, is critical if government is going to be accountable to women. However, there is a tendency to assume that decentralisation is intrinsically more likely to generate better understanding of women’s service requirements and community needs, through the proximity of locally elected representatives to their constituents. The section above demonstrates that this is not automatic. Similarly, more efficient service delivery at the local level does not guarantee more gender sensitive service delivery, on the contrary.

The undeniably close association between decentralisation and neoliberalism means that decentralisation policies are often accompanied by cutbacks in central government allocations to local authorities, requiring them to raise their own revenue. While fiscal decentralisation and financial autonomy is often used as a positive indicator of democratic decentralisation, it can leave local governments vulnerable in the face of multiplying responsibilities and diminishing resources, the problem often referred to as
'unfunded mandates’. When local authorities have to recover their own costs, they do this, directly or indirectly, through service fees and user charges. While the ‘user pays’ principle can be potentially redistributive, the impact of cost recovery for services can be devastating for poor people. Moreover, in low-income households it is often women who bear the burden of cost recovery and the consequences of failure to pay, whether in the form of water and electricity cut-offs, escalating household debts or reduced consumption. Social movements that mobilises poor people around these issues, such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum in South Africa, tend to include women in their rank and file - they are often a majority of members – but do not always take up the gender issues involved (Hassim, 2004:25). Here women not only need to be organised but require technical skills to engage officials and bureaucrats on matters of planning. They also need leadership skills to argue their corner outside the women’s movement, both in relation to government agencies and within social justice organisations themselves.

**Fiscal Decentralisation: Holding Government to Account**

One of the arenas through which women have sought to hold government to account as been through a ‘watchdog’ role in relation to revenue and expenditure. Gender-responsive budgets (GRBs) are mechanisms by which governments, in dialogue with other sectors, can integrate gender analysis into public expenditure policies and budgets. This does not imply separate budgets for women but rather the political will to disaggregate expenditure according to its differential impact on women and men (Commonwealth Secretariat 2001:1). Gender analysis of local government budgets is not as advanced as efforts at the national level. If women’s budget initiatives are to be paralleled at the local level then the issue of local taxation becomes critical. This is not least because of the issues raised in the preceding section. Women are key payers of local rates and taxes. For example, in urban areas they pay licences and site fees for market stalls and street traders’ permits, while in rural areas they can be obliged to pay levies and tribute to customary authorities. As such, women have a right to make demands on local governments and to hold them accountable.
The example of South Africa suggests that some progress has been made. Capacity building programmes inform women about local government expenditures and revenues and the impact of these on women (Coopoo 2000). Women organising around gender and local government issues sought to team up with the Women’s Budget Initiative (WBI) (Budlender, 1999b) with some limited success. What is notable is that the focus on local government budgets has shifted the bias of the WBI itself, from scrutiny of expenditure towards greater concentration on how revenue is raised. Budlender (1999a:21) has argued that not only are the revenue sources of local government – which include intergovernmental transfers, property taxes, licence fees, tariffs for services and user charges – more diverse than for national or provincial government, but they can have a particularly adverse affect on women. As argued above, this is particularly the case with user charges, which often become women’s responsibility within households. If local authorities are primarily dependent on cost recovery as a revenue source, then problems related to socio-economic rights are likely to get worse rather than better for low-income women.

**Conclusion**

If local democracy is to be engendered and women’s political and socio-economic rights advanced, at and from the local level, then gender and development specialists need to be cognisant of some of the sub-texts and dangers of decentralisation processes and RBA agendas that are driven exclusively by neo-liberal development agendas. At the same time, as Molyneux and Razavi (2002:4) have pointed out, the focus on democracy and human rights currently provides ‘the only effective means to challenge inequality and to advance programmes that would promote greater social justice and more equitable development’.

In other words, although cynics might be correct in seeing the pursuit of women’s rights as putting a ‘human face’ on neo-liberal preoccupations with individualism and property rights and as deflecting attention from persistent poverty and increasing inequality, it is nevertheless an important arena for advancing gender equity. A focus on women’s rights
pre-dates RBAs and can be traced to 20th century women’s movements across the world and to women in development (WID) initiatives from the late 1960s onwards. As such, a focus on rights has always informed feminist analysis and organisation. Just because RBAs have been claimed or utilised by an international development industry that is found to be wanting, does not mean the quest for women’s rights is equally tainted. Indeed, RBAs have extended the focus from a primary concern with women’s legal and political rights to their socio-economic or so-called ‘third generation rights’. What is problematic, however, is when the assertion of rights is top-down and approached as competition over needs satisfaction, outside of a politics of both redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1989) combined with a negotiated process over needs identification.

Similarly with decentralisation, to be blindly critical is to miss the opportunity for widening the room for manoeuvre at the local level. This is both in terms of enhanced participation in local politics and increased accountability for effective and efficient service delivery. Many feminists writing on politics have focused on the importance of engaging the state at national level and clearly this is where substantive gains have often been made, constitutionally and in relation to protection and advancement of women’s human development and welfare. However, the rolling back of the welfare state over recent decades demonstrates all too clearly how fragile such feminist victories have been. This provides a compelling argument for supporting women’s participation in an embedded local politics that are coordinated with state policy at all levels. Nevertheless, as I have argued here and elsewhere (Beall, 2005a, 2005b), the way in which social and political forces intermesh at the local level makes this a particularly difficult arena for women’s political engagement rather than the common contrary view that it is a site of easy entrance into public life.

Nevertheless, retaining safe spaces for local level organisation can help women engage the state and quite effectively. This is illustrated, for example, by Tripp’s (2000) work on women’s political organisation in Uganda, which shows that a degree of social autonomy from the state can provide precisely the bridge for women to enter into local democracy. Moreover, analysis of the democratic transition in South Africa has shown that
democratic impulses emerge from struggles over state provision. Here, women’s negotiation over their socio-economic rights, which relate intimately to their gendered interests and the social sphere, have contributed to rekindling the embers of local democracy (Mosoetsa, 2005).

For decentralisation and women’s rights to be positively correlated both need to be part of wider democratic processes in which women are organised in civil society and represented politically at all levels of governance. If the attainment of women’s rights at national level assists women’s political involvement locally, and if women’s political gains through participation in local governance permeate upwards, then the concept of inter-governmental relations might usefully replace that of decentralisation in order to signal accountability mechanisms operating in both directions. The role of international development across this terrain should be to support democratic decentralisation (understood as an amalgam of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation) only as part of well-lubricated inter-governmental relations and to see RBAs as a useful and relevant means of extending political rights to socio-economic rights through effective and equitable service delivery.

With this in mind I conclude that there are three prerequisites if decentralisation is to be positively associated with women’s rights. First, women need to be organised and represented politically, otherwise decentralisation remains nothing more than an administrative exercise, and one that invariably ignores their interests and priorities. Second, decentralisation is best pursued through well-lubricated inter-governmental relations in the context of a strong state and women’s organisation has to engage across the full terrain of government. It is at national level that women have made most gains politically. If their voice is to be sustained and reinforced across all levels of government, then women’s political participation at the local level requires support and integration into broader political processes. Third, international support to decentralisation policies has to be monitored to ensure it does not ignore or undermine local democracy and women’s rights, through over-emphasis on administrative decentralisation.
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