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The Experiences of Women in Local Government

- A Case-study in the Durban Metropolitan Area

The Experiences of Women in Local Government – A Case-study in the Durban Metropolitan Area

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ABSTRACT

Equal opportunity for all citizens, as enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa (1996), places gender as one of the key areas of redress in the process of transformation of the state and its structures. Local government has been a focal area of policy transformation, ensuring gender equity and equality.

A case study of the Durban Metropolitan Area (1996 to 2000) revealed that women’s participation in local government is fraught with problems, which bars their progressive development. The research identifies key stakeholders whose interventions would contribute to engendering state structures enabling equitable participation of women in local government.

Introduction

Gender dynamics in the 1980s were shadowed by the struggle for democracy in South Africa. The advent of a new democracy and the autonomy of women to participate in politics spawned new discourses surrounding gender. In the 1990s ‘democratization of gender’ was the mantra in attempts to eradicate gender inequality and inequity. Transformation of patriarchal structures of the state saw the shift of emphasis from the racial injustice to gendered democracy with the inclusion of women at all levels of government.

The history of oppression and subjugation of women raises the question of the rights of women in our new dispensation. Advocates of gender equity emphasize that women’s rights are human rights.

The South African Women’s Charter (1994), defines the rights and participation of women in governance as follows:

“Conventionally, democracy and human rights have been defined and interpreted in terms of men’s experiences... If democracy and human rights are to be meaningful for women, they must address our historical subordination and oppression. Women participate in, and shape, the nature and form of our democracy” (Seidman, 1999:287).

Although the participation of women has increased significantly in the various spheres of government, women are still marginalized whilst serving in their roles as elected members. The Commonwealth Local Government Forum (1996) aimed at encouraging the development of democracy, fundamental human rights, and a just and honest government at local level. The symposium sought to promote participatory democracy, the empowerment of citizens, placing due emphasis on the promotion of equal rights and the role of women in development.

International Environments

Women’s organisations lobbying for the elimination of discrimination against women on the grounds of race, class, ethnicity, and sex have been the driving force behind the inclusion of women in governance in countries such as Zimbabwe, Canada, Australia, Norway and South Africa (International Conference on Women, 1993). Although coercion from women’s organisations and feminist activists ensured government intervention resulting in a margin of representation of women in decision-making positions, women are still under-represented.

While women constitute 50% of the world’s population, women comprise a mere 10,5% of politicians worldwide, and the figures are still dropping (Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1996).

The Fifth African Regional Conference on Women (1994) cites various social and political impediments which women in Africa are subjected to. This is due to the lack of empowerment of women, which bars their advancement. Democratisation has had varying success in Africa (African Charter). As defined in the Charter; democracy is the free expression of people (men, women, youth) to determine their own political and cultural systems. Given the long-standing

discrimination against women in Africa, critical measures need to be taken to ensure full participation of women in decision-making and policy formulation.

The South African scenario

On the South African political front, the rights and recognition of women has been the key area of redress. However, formulation of firm gender equity policy at national and local level and the implementation of ‘power’ positions for women in Local Government has not been sufficiently addressed and implemented.

Recent statistics indicate that women make up 52% of the South African population (SALGA, 1998). Despite this, the first democratic Local Government elections in 1996 saw woman constituting less than 20% of elected Councillors, with 14,4% being representatives of Council executives (SALGA, 1998). The content analysis of the author’s research indicates that the above statistic is aligned to or runs parallel to the composition of women councillors in the Durban Metropolitan sub-structures. It further reveals that women’s participation in local government is fraught with problems, due to the patriarchal mindsets and organizational structures, which impede women’s participation.

The focus of this study was to:

- Test the gender sensitivity of the male counterparts;
- Tap into the reasons for low representation of women in the sub-structures;
- Investigate whether the gendered needs of women in local government were being fulfilled;
- Ascertain the degree of representation of women on the Executive Committee in each sub-structure;
- Examine the decision-making clout of those women serving on Executive Committees;
- Assess the effectiveness of support structures for new women councillors as well as those who required assistance;
- Craft strategies which would increase the participation of women in local government as well as strategies to eradicate impediments which women in local government face.

The analyses of person-to-person interviews with both male and female elected members of the seven sub-structures reveal many statistics and conceptions parallel to international as well as local studies executed in municipalities in other provinces.

Core statistics below indicate that the representation of women in these local government structures is fairly low with none attaining the desired quota of 50% thereby ensuring equity, and just one ‘the critical mass of even 30%’ (SALGA, 1998).

Councillors in the Durban Metropolitan Area

MUNICIPALITY	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL	% FEMALE
Durban Metro	13	55	68	19.1
North Central	14	50	64	21.9
South Central	14	46	60	23
Inner West	9	32	41	21.9
Outer Western	13	25	38	34
South Local Council	8	23	31	25.8
North Local Council	2	29	31	6.4
TOTAL	73	260	333	21.9

Annexure 6F: Durban Metro and substructure boundaries as finally proclaimed, December 1995 and March 1996 respectively (this is how the boundaries currently stand in the Durban Metropolitan Area)

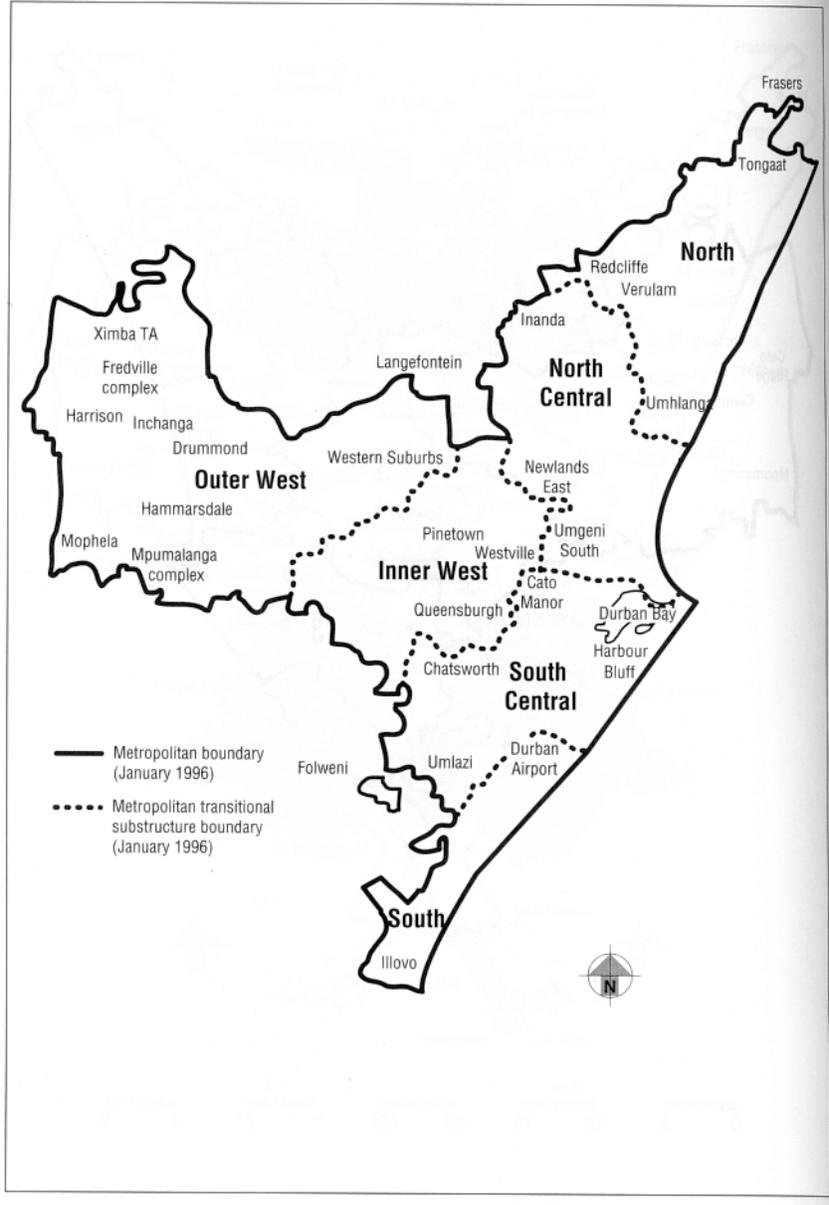


Fig. 1 The 6 transitional substructures within the Durban Metro for the Local government election of 1996
from Cameron (ed.), 1999

The above statistics were drawn from lists of names councillors currently in office in the Durban Metropolitan Area (August: 2000).

The analyses of this research compel the author to discuss the dynamics listed below, as these are indicative of the experiences and are dominant opinions of councillors serving with the above councils.

‘Power’ struggles in councils

Various facets of power are apparent in spheres of governance. “Power” to males means ‘power over’ (dominate) and to women it means ‘power to’ (empowerment) (Valji, 2000). The male mind-sets of superiority and the right to dominate, stems from the patriarchal structures of the state and traditional cultures, where women were taught to be submissive and assume roles of subordinates. However, women have indicated that feminine democracy lay in the scalpels palmed to them by the ‘new’ democracy. Thus, the condescending and dominant attitudes of the male contingent should be converted into positive interventions in sculpturing a confident brigade of women leaders.

Male councillors concede that there are two distinct behaviour patterns noted in the presence of female councillors; the male councillors either try to impress their female counterparts or dominate them (interview, Male Councillor, 13/10/2000).

Aligned to the low percentage of female councillors in all sub-structures, is the inequitable representation of female councillors on the Executive Committees (Exco). Although political parties profess to abide by the gender policy of the national Gender Commission, woman’s representation on the Exco is below the quota of equity, i.e. 50%. An astonishing revelation extracted from the respondent’s views on women’s decision- making power on Exco indicates that women are often coerced into agreement even if they may feel differently. Caucussing on issues and arriving at an agreement within a party is viewed as a unified decision, which is permissible within the realms of politics. However, if in light of opposing views ones perspective changes, such an individual may be viewed as a traitor or especially in the case of women, a ‘noise-maker’. Yet it is acceptable for a man to debate his stance.

Low level of participation of women

Many common clustered viewpoints below, of respondents, which cite factors contributing to the low percentage of women in active decision-making processes and in local governance:

- The lack of finance for campaigning, lack of support from family mainly due to cultural perspectives of women’s participation in politics, which runs counter to the femininity of women.
- A dominant viewpoint, which emerged from the analyses is that, it is the psychological construct of the female psyche, which allow women to relegate themselves to lower rungs of politics. ‘Women are their own enemies’ opine male councillors. They deem themselves incapable of serving in positions of ‘chair’ and members of Executive Committees by refraining from active participation.
- The lack of confidence explains their reluctance to chair Standing Committees and Working Groups. This hinders their opportunity to gain experience and exposure to the previously male domain of ‘taking charge’ and responsibility for decisions taken.

Yet women prove to be highly proactive in spheres of community affairs. They excel in areas of driving service delivery to communities for example, water provision and social issues, such as skills development programmes for rural communities; which brings out their inherent nurturing character. Female councillors align this trait to their experience of living without basic needs, which enables them to identify with the victims of poverty and discrimination. The majority view is that women councillors, more than men, drive basic needs, poverty issues and skills acquisition needs of women in the community. They are more involved in mobilising women in the community to become proactive and improve their lives.

Considering that women’s strengths emerge more in humane areas, it is therefore convenient for managers to exclude them from technical and financial domains, implicitly pitching these as a male bastion.

Councillors both male and female from the previously disadvantaged communities raised the question of discrimination, and its impact on women’s participation. Female councillors vociferously articulate that it is their lack of exposure, due to illiteracy and compulsory rural living which robbed them of the opportunity to be involved in even opposition movements and local politics during the apartheid era.

The way forward which was conceived was, the introduction of core modules in administrative and financial skills training together with writing skills, which will enhance the ability of the youth, and especially women. Confidence and self-esteem, and articulation , will serve as catalysts in increasing the participation of women in local government.

Workshops and Seminars

Support structures in terms of confidence and capacity building, may serve as personal development mechanisms and be profitable to new women councillors. However, such training is not specific to female councillors. Councillors agree that workshops will be of great benefit to those who feel intimidated due to language constraints, as this occurs even amongst male councillors. Workshops and seminars for councillors are futile if skills, which are acquired, are not implemented and shared, as argued by councillors, and more significantly not taken advantage of when made available.

Gender specific needs of women

The notion of gendered citizenship, insists that South Africa’s ‘new’ democracy address gender subordination at all levels of government – from establishing a day care centre to removing all gender inequalities (Seidman, 1999:288). Crèches and day-care centres have never featured on the agendas of certain councils. According to male councillors, child-care is a personal issue, which a woman should decide upon even before entering politics.

However, certain more sensitive male and female respondents indicated that there was a dire need for such facilities, considering that women are unable to remain at meetings after hours or attend to community crisis, due to maternal commitments. Yet, non-attendance of women councillors at

evening meetings was jeered at. When attempts were made to address the construction of such facilities for women, it was perceived as a ‘waste of taxpayers money’. Such response was largely from the male contingent. Benefits of crèche facility allow male councillors as well, an opportunity to share the parental responsibility of child-care.

Establishment of a Gender Desk/Working Group

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum resolves that, local women councillors promote gender working groups at the political level and develop supportive administrative machinery in order to encourage further participation of women in local government, ensuring that policy discussion and implementation reflects the concerns of local woman (1996).

The presence of Gender Desks and Gender Working Groups appeared to be the solutions to gender sensitivity and inequity. However, delving into the effectiveness of such a mechanism as gleaned from the analyses of the study, (interview, Male and Female Councillors, October 2000) indicated that:

- The establishment was in fulfillment of the recommendations from the Gender Commission, thus serving as a token:
- There often exists a misconception of gender being a women’s problem, thus male councillors view other issues as more important:
- For councils with a majority rural population, hence a low rates base, gender concerns seem to feature as a secondary issue, if at all:
- There is a lack of a mainstream strategy and legal imperatives to drive and compel an active gender-working group.

Triple role of women, as mother, wife and councillor

The majority of the women councillors confess that it is not possible to balance their work commitments and domestic responsibility. ‘It is always our families who suffer the loss - being a representative of the people we dedicate our lives to the quest to abide by the conviction of *batho*

pele - putting the people first’. Women face the added impediment of competing against men, and having to contend with male family members who resist sharing domestic responsibility.

Changing the perception of the electorate that the male is a powerful and more effective leader is a tedious exercise. Thus, apathy of the electorate (male and female) may be cited as one of the barriers, impeding gender equality and increased numbers of women winning ward elections or even entering politics. Amazingly, women in the community undermine women’s capability by electing a male leader. The traditional role of wife and housewife often remains unchanged in the views of many husbands, placing strain and stress on women councillors who are juggling various roles.

Sexual Harassment Policy

The critical issue of sexual harassment is often dispelled in light of the view that such an incident is inconceivable amongst high-powered responsible people. Yet, a case reported in *The Daily News* (06/02/00), occurring within the offices of the Premier of the province reveals that sexual harassment is a real issue.

From an enquiry into the gender imperatives facing parties and councils for December, 2000 elections, it is apparent that although cognisance had been taken of gender policy and gender imperatives, increased women’s participation was not significant enough to be pitched high on the agendas of councils. More attention was given to strategies to secure seats within the new structures of Local Government.

Conclusion

One of the main resolutions emerging from this study is that gender issues should become a main item on the agenda of the councils, and not relegated to sub-committee level only. Councils should become more gender-sensitive and gender-representative; they should also change their mindsets and regard gender as a ‘serious issue’. A short-term resolution for the beginning of the new local government structures in 2001 for the Durban Unicity structures, is to embark on a

gender-awareness campaign. Women should be encouraged to attend training in traditionally male-dominated fields for example, project management and service delivery. Gender sensitization and mentorship programmes for young councillors as well as the youth should be developed.

International Conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) should not merely be adopted, they should be adapted for the South African context. Women councillors from various councils should affiliate to international women’s bodies, establish links, and bring international experience home to promote education of women in the community. A ‘resolutions committee’ should be set up to lobby for transformation of patriarchal policy-making structures, first within councils itself, but also outside local government structures. Such a committee should ensure that conference resolutions were carried forward and their implementation monitored. Women should strive for ‘expulsion’ from ‘soft’ areas of work and enter male-dominated areas with vigour and vitality (interviews, Councillors, October, 2000). If women do not assert themselves and ensure that they become part of the dynamics of the transformation of gender relations, nobody will do it for them. They have a duty toward themselves to ensure that they become part of the dynamics of transformation of gender relations.

The above strategies and recommendations will serve to inform stakeholders of the way forward to gender equity and equality. An engendered state will mark a ‘new dawn’ in the South African political arena for the empowerment of women.

Recommendations

“Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women’s perspectives in all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved” (Beijing Platform for Action, 1995).

The initial strategies to a way forward to be considered at grassroots level or local level will be to:

- Educate all role players emphasizing that democracy in our country is not confined to racial dynamics and that women’s rights are human rights.
- Conscientise the electorate about the importance of women’s participation, which will allow the change in patriarchal mindsets, and increased support for women.
- Ensure commitment of political parties to act as the impetus for equality and equity within parties, eliminate male bias, create support both financial and moral - subsequently encouraging women to participate in local politics.
- Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to drive, implement, and monitor state interventions and policy on gender equity, at local level.
- Mobilize grassroots support to ensure that pressure is put on political parties from below (van Donk, and Maceba, 1999).
- Women’s organizations or gender committees within councils should elect a media ‘watchdog’ to monitor how media portrays and promotes women. Furthermore, such a mechanism should be valuable in educating women on the use of the media to promote themselves and women’s issues, whilst challenging gender-insensitivity in media reports.

Possible interventions by state and other institutions:

- Soon after the 1994 elections, two key national government initiatives addressing gender issues namely; the Commission on Gender Equality and the Office on the Status of Women (OSW) were established. Subsequently, certain provinces like Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, and Gauteng prioritised the establishment of Gender Standing Committees and Commissioners were appointed to define their own mandates and terms of reference. Yet, no formal gender structure was set up in KwaZulu-Natal or the Free State at that stage (Albertyn, 1996). Thus, lack of

guidelines and monitoring hampers the quest of advancing the equality of women. In view of this the ‘gendered’ approach to governance has not been attainable in local government structures in KwaZulu-Natal (Female Councillors, October 2000). Thus, the formation of gender forums is strongly recommended at provincial level together with a work-plan on implementation at local level.

- ❑ The gender discourses on policy need to be more clearly defined; equality and equity are used interchangeably creating confusion in implementation leading to constant reformulation of policy.
- ❑ A synergy between the spheres of government, congruent with the goal of gender equity and equality will ensure mainstreaming of gender issues, integrating gender into mainstream programmes; identification of roles and responsibilities of gender working groups/gender units as well as those commissioned to oversee such interventions.
- ❑ Furthermore, councils should work at clearly defining the role of gender working groups or committees, in their internal policy documents.
- ❑ At the stage of implementation of policies - resource problems arise; insufficient funds and inadequate skills are identified (Friedman, 1999:10), state intervention with accrual of foreign funding, will avail trained consultants to implement training workshops for councillors in local government.
- ❑ It is recommended that councils should ensure integration of gender planning methodology into all normal planning routines of councils.
- ❑ Councils should look into creating access for women to participate in policy formulation.
- ❑ Provincial or national mechanisms on gender advocacy should identify and train teams of trainers who will in turn execute training programmes at all councils, including empowerment of rural women.
- ❑ Gender policies should include a strategy to enable the sensitisation of gender equality in all forums.
- ❑ Councils should be committed to eradicate traces of organizational culture and structure, with a goal of transparency and accountability.

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