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Gender and Intersecting Inequalities in Local Government in South Asia

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Summary

This paper is an evidence review of how intersecting forms of inequalities influence women's political participation and representation at the local level in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The review shows that while the quota system has increased women's presence in local government, intersections of gender and caste or gender and class affect minority women's ability to contest elections, participate in local government meetings, contest opinions, and represent the interests of their community and that of gender equality in different ways. These intersections also make women vulnerable to discriminatory practices within the government and also to violence. How effectively minority women are able to tackle discriminatory practices is influenced by the nature of patriarchy, the history of women's engagement in local level institutions, women's involvement in political mobilisations and engagement of women's organisations on these issues. The paper also identifies research, policy and programme gaps on intersectional identities and women's political participation.

Keywords: local government, South Asia, intersectionality, gender quota, minority women's participation, women's political empowerment, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan.

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Acronyms

AP	Andhra Pradesh
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India-Marxist
CSO	civil society organisation
FATA	Federally Assisted Tribal Areas
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MFLO	Muslim Family Law Ordinance
MKSS	Majdur Kishan Sramik Samity
MP	Madhya Pradesh
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NWFP	North-West Frontier Province
OBC	Other Backward Classes
PRI	<i>Panchayati Raj</i> Institutions
RCTs	randomised control trials
SC	Scheduled Caste
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association
ST	Scheduled Tribe
UMP	Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad
UP	Uttar Pradesh
WVG	Whole Village Group

Glossary

<i>bahu</i>	daughter-in-law
<i>beti</i>	daughter
<i>biwi</i>	wife
chapati	bread
<i>gram shabha</i>	village council meetings
pradhan	head
<i>pradesh</i>	province
<i>sarpanch</i>	elected head of the local government (India)
<i>shalish</i>	informal arbitration
<i>tehsil</i>	subdistrict (Pakistan)
Union Parishad	Local government body at the union level (Bangladesh)
<i>upazila</i>	subdistrict (Bangladesh)
<i>zila</i>	district (Bangladesh)

Practice summary

Gender and other forms of identity-based inequalities – class, caste, ethnicity, religion – overlap and generally position women from poor and socially marginalised groups in the most disadvantageous position. This evidence review of gender and local government studies in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan explores the experiences of women from socially excluded groups in relation to four areas: (a) minority women’s experience in accessing political space; (b) their ability to contest elections; (c) how minority women voice their concerns and exercise authority in local governance processes; and (d) whether they represent the interests of their communities and gender-related concerns, and if they do, which kinds of interests they prioritise.

The evidence for this review was collated from published materials – academic, international and national agency reports and programme evaluation reports produced in the last three decades on rural women representatives in South Asia. Quotas have worked as a measure to increase the number of women in local government in all three countries. In India, the intersection of gender and caste plays a significant role in determining political opportunities for women. The introduction of gender and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe quotas that are closed to men/dominant caste groups in a particular election cycle created opportunities for backward class women to contest elections and support for women running as candidates within the family and their community. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, intersections of gender and class are key determinants that influence women’s ability to contest elections. Women from low-income groups or landless women find it difficult to contest.

The presence of women, including women from minority groups, in local government is changing. Proxy representation is in decline in India but a more mixed picture is revealed in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Mandatory inclusion of minority women in committees helps to increase women’s presence but there are risks that attendance by women may take a ritualistic form of participation. This is because women in general – and minority women in particular – experience various forms of social constraints that include active silencing, verbal abuse, and disruption by men (and dominant group) members. Minority women representatives are also more vulnerable to organised forms of violence at the hands of class/caste-dominant groups.

Intersections of gender and class also influence women’s capacity to minimise domestic work and devote time for political activities. Poor women are unable to afford market solutions that the upper caste/class women can, and poor women have to rely on the support of the husband and other female family members for carrying out the domestic duties. In fact in all three countries, evidence showed that for minority women, families played a paradoxical role. They were key sources of support for electoral campaigns, access to information, and for mobilising their communities. However, family members also use violence and try to control women’s political agency. This means alternative routes of support for women need to be identified.

Despite these constraints, minority women’s capacity to participate in local decision-making processes, awareness about systems of marginalisation, and aspirations in terms of their role in politics have changed. But the key question is how to sustain this changed awareness and retain them in politics?

The review shows that there are various **enabling factors** related to individual capacity and factors that are related to the context that create an enabling environment for minority women to exercise agency and tackle discrimination. First, literacy and awareness training for minority women to build their individual capacities remain critical measures for political leadership. Second, less restrictive patriarchal norms on women’s mobility, interactions with non-related males and a long history of women engaging in local government work means

that those areas have an enabling environment for women's public engagement compared to areas where these social and historical factors are absent. Third, self-help groups and government-created women's collectives for poor backward caste women are effective training grounds for attaining leadership qualities. Fourth, women's organisations serve as key social networks for women representatives from marginalised backgrounds: these wider cross-sectional alliances and movements allow minority women to overcome intersectional barriers to their progress. Fifth, party ideology that emphasises women's rights and rights of marginalised groups and political party's activities in mobilising women along these lines create enabling conditions for marginalised women's political agency. Sixth, various institutional innovations such as gender-responsive local budgeting, ring-fencing funds for women's development, mandatory inclusion of women constituents in ward level/public meetings can create enabling conditions for minority women to exercise political agency.

The review also revealed several research, policy and programme gaps. **Evidence and research gaps** include the following. First, various intersections between gender and other identities such as religion and tribal identities remain under-researched in Bangladesh and Pakistan. There is also limited evidence on how religious minority women exercise political agency in India. Second, apart from quotas, gender analyses of other types of policies exist on a piecemeal basis in gender and politics literature and there is a need for a systematic review of the range of different policies that support minority women. Third, research needs to be conducted to unpack the multiple loyalties women representatives may have and understand the strategic benefits women may secure by addressing specific concerns instead of assuming that women will automatically promote gender-related concerns.

Apart from the evidence gaps, the review also shows there are **policy and programme gaps**. First, in the case of Bangladesh and Pakistan, there is a need for exploring what measures may support poor women to take advantage of the quota system. Second, addressing how women's care burden affects political participation in programmes designed for women's representatives is another key gap. Third, there is also a need to create mechanisms beyond the formal redressal systems that seems to have little effect on preventing the violence perpetrated against minority women. Fourth, in policymaking and programming on strengthening gender equity at the local level, a focus on political parties remains largely absent, which needs to be addressed.

1 Introduction: The challenge of intersecting inequalities for women in local government

When it comes to women in politics, South Asian countries, particularly Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, offer interesting paradoxes. All of these countries have had female heads of state,¹ and women have held key positions in the government as Speakers of Parliament,² cabinet ministers and also as leaders of the opposition. Yet despite women's accession to top leadership positions, women's presence in many decision-making bodies remains low. The proportion of women members of parliament (MPs) in South Asia at 19 per cent is below the global average (UNWomen 2014). Women's presence in the public sector bureaucracy remains low in this region (UNWomen and ICRW 2012).³ The provision of reserved seats

¹ Indira Gandhi, India (three terms and was also head of government after declaring Emergency in 1975); Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh (three terms); Khaleda Zia, Bangladesh (two terms); Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan (two terms). Some regional parties in India had female heads, who won elections and have held the Chief Minister's post several times.

² In 2015, these three countries had female speakers.

³ The percentage of women in bureaucracy is less than 15 per cent in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Women's presence increases in public service delivery programmes at the local level that are largely female oriented such as population control programmes, primary health care, etc. (UNWomen and ICRW 2012).

and gender quotas has ensured women are making inroads in larger numbers in local government, a space where they were largely absent before the quotas were introduced. Interestingly, women's increased numerical presence has not led to 'political effectiveness' (Goetz and Hassim 2003) of women as a social group. Women experience various forms of gendered barriers that limit women's representation and participation (Bari 2000; Buch 2000; Menon 2000; Chowdhury and Nelson 1994; Chowdhury 2003; Jayal 2006; Panday 2008; Khattak 2010).⁴ In spite of these barriers, the increased presence of women has led to a slow shift in public and policy discourse where women's needs and gender-related concerns at the local level have gained ground. While these are positive shifts, the impact of women's increased presence and change in public policy discourse may be limited given the intersecting forms of inequalities that mediate and reinforce the constraints on women's political agency. This paper is a review of evidence on how intersecting forms of inequalities influence the way women are able to act as representatives at the local level. It asks the following questions. First, how do intersecting inequalities influence women's ability to participate and exercise political agency at the local level? Second, what kinds of strategies do women use to minimise and mitigate the constraints of intersecting inequalities? Third, what contextual and other factors enhance the political agency of minority women? Moreover, there is a need to explore whether elite women contribute to the subordination of minority women and undermine the potential development of gender-based solidarity and strategic cooperation on advancing gender equality policies.

The paper specifically focuses on the experiences of minority women and how they exercise political agency in the following areas: (a) contesting elections; (b) participating in local governance processes; and (c) representing gender and their social group interests (see Table 1.1). The analysis of the evidence based on these questions helps in developing a more nuanced picture of how women exercise political agency to mitigate the constraints created by different forms of inequalities and power relations at the local level.

Research on women in local government in South Asia reveals that women experience structural, cultural and attitudinal barriers. In a nutshell, these barriers include: women's lack of material and social resources; restrictions on mobility; social and cultural norms that prevent women's access to public spaces; gender division of labour; gender-biased attitude of the male members and government officers at the local level; and gender-biased rules and systems of local government. These gendered barriers are mediated by other forms of identity-based inequalities – such as class, ethnicity, caste, religion – that influence the way women are able to act as representatives at the local level. While it is widely acknowledged in the literature that gender inequalities along with other identity-based inequalities (class, caste, religion, ethnicity, etc.) reinforce disadvantages experienced by women (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014), most studies have largely focused on the following themes or areas. Feminist literature on women in politics have focused on the terms of women's inclusion through quotas, impact of these terms on women's agency, and whether inclusion would lead to transformation of politics at the local level (Kaushik 1998; Menon 2000; Chowdhury 2003; Mumtaz 2005; John 2007).⁵ The comparative studies by feminists and gender scholars on quotas have largely investigated quotas at the national level rather than the local level (UNWomen 2014). There are fewer cross-country comparative studies on quotas at the local level⁶ (Nazneen 2016). In the South Asian context, social scientists have largely explored the effectiveness of gender quotas, i.e. whether quotas lead to women representatives representing women's needs and interests (Vysulu and Vysulu 2000; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Beaman *et al.* 2006; 2008;

⁴ These are a few of the studies among many that explore these issues.

⁵ These are only a few among many others.

⁶ See Tadros (2014) for a nine-country study exploring women's pathways into local government, although the cases were not designed with a comparative framework. The Pathways of Women's Empowerment conducted surveys based on a common framework in four countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Ghana and Palestine).

Panday 2008; Khan and Mohsin 2008). They have also investigated the difference between men and women's leadership, policy preference, and their ability to influence policy decisions. Most of these studies take women's entry through quotas as their starting point to explore whether women's political inclusion leads to change and investigate the nature of gendered barriers experienced by women.

Many of these studies also contain evidence on how gender inequalities intersect with other forms of identity-based inequalities and influence women representative's ability to act in the political domain. While existing literature takes intersecting inequalities on board when analysing the experience of women in local government, their key area of focus is on women's 'substantive representation' (Phillips 1991) and whether the existence of a critical mass of women created a tipping point in representation of women's interests and *not* on intersecting inequalities. The evidence from these studies can be reviewed using intersectional inequalities as an analytical lens to unpack how these inequalities influence women's voice and participation in local government. The focus on intersecting inequalities moves the analysis presented here from the near exclusive focus on effectiveness of gender quotas present in the existing literature on women in politics.

Kabeer (2016) points out that gender and other forms of identity-based inequalities – class, caste, ethnicity, religion – overlap and generally position women and girls from poor and socially marginal groups in the most disadvantaged position in society. This marginalisation extends to the political arena in the form of lack of political voice and ability to represent one's group interests. Feminist literature on intersectionality is useful for conceptualising how women from minority communities may experience political marginalisation. Although the concept of intersectionality does not automatically mean intersectional inequality, it has been used to unpack how women from minority communities may experience marginalisation in politics (Crenshaw 1994). Grounded in Black and multiracial feminist analysis, intersectionality is used to conceptualise how racism, sexism and the forms of bigotries create multiple barriers for minority women (Crenshaw 1994; Glenn 1999; Weber 2001). Crenshaw (1994) argues that women of colour situated within two subordinated groups (race and gender) need to devote their energies between two, and at times, opposing agendas and experience both racism and sexism. While the idea of intersectionality was developed based on the experiences of women of colour, the points about conflicting agendas and experiences of marginalisation on the grounds that one belongs to various subordinate groups can be applied to unpack the experiences of minority women (based on caste, class, religion, ethnicity, location) in South Asia. An important point to note here is that the focus of the feminist literature on intersectionality and intersectional inequalities has been on the disadvantages experienced by marginal groups. While this is largely true, research on quotas have also revealed that in specific electoral and political contexts, particularly where a tandem quota system exists,⁷ intersectional identities (gender and race/ethnic identity) may provide strategic opportunities for women (Fraga *et al.* 2008). In fact, Hancock (2014) points out that by placing the experience of marginalisation of minority women at the centre, the intersectionality literature has paid scant attention to agency and also privilege.

This indicates that in examining the literature on women in local government in South Asia, specific focus should be on the following issue areas: (a) minority women's subjective experience of the structural barriers reinforced by intersecting inequalities; (b) minority women agency or strategies minority women use to mitigate the constraints of intersecting inequalities; (c) and the contextual and other factors that create strategic advantages for minority women to renegotiate their roles. Table 1.1 lists the issue areas and specific sub-questions investigated in this review. It should be noted that these issue areas are closely linked hence discussion in Section 5 will contain some overlaps.

⁷ In a tandem quota system a combination of gender and minority quotas is implemented (Hughes 2011).

Table 1.1 Issue areas and sub-questions

Issue areas	Specific questions
Subjective experience of structural barriers: Minority women’s experience in politics (and how do these differ from the experience of women from dominant groups or men from minority groups)	How do intersecting forms of inequalities influence minority women’s ability to contest elections? How does gender intersect with multiple forms of identity minority women embody and influence women’s ability to participate in local governance processes? What kinds of exclusionary practices do minority women experience in local government decision-making processes? What role does violence play in limiting women’s political options and engagement?
Agency and representation: Minority women’s strategies for representation and exercising agency	How do minority women overcome the constraints of intersecting inequalities to exercise authority? Do minority women represent their group and gender interests? Which takes priority?
Enabling context and factors	What contextual conditions and other factors enable minority women to enhance their political agency? When does the intersection of gender with other forms of identity become a strategic advantage for women in politics?

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 provides a brief description of how the literature was selected and the common themes developed for analysis. Section 3 provides an overview of women in politics in local government in South Asia and the nature of reservations at the local level in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Section 4 presents how intersecting inequalities operate in practice – the kinds of barriers they create for minority women and how minority women mitigate the constraints of intersecting inequalities and under what conditions based on their intersecting identity (i.e. gender and class/caste/kin group, etc.) they are able to gain strategic advantage in exercising political agency. Section 4 also discusses the kinds of evidence that are available for the three countries on these issues. Section 5 looks at what these findings mean for the policymakers and researchers interested in women’s representation and gender equality in local governance. Section 6 draws conclusions, exploring what the key findings are that emerge from the analysis. It also discusses the key issues that policymakers need to take into account for addressing gender and other forms of interrelated inequalities in local politics.

2 Scope and methodology

Bangladesh, India and Pakistan were selected as case study countries for the following reasons. First, these countries fall under the ‘classic patriarchal belt’⁸ (Townsend and Momsen 1987; Kabeer 1994) and share similar social and cultural contexts and a common historical legacy of how local government evolved under the British Colonial rule. All of these countries have majoritarian electoral systems and party-based political systems, albeit there have been ruptures in democratic practice in Bangladesh and Pakistan during the periods of military rule. It should be noted that the evolution of the local government system and the

⁸ The classic patriarchal belt extends from the MENA region to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Northern India and Bangladesh. Descent and property is through the male line. The ideology of men as the breadwinner and women as economic dependants is sustained by pronounced gender division of labour, gender segregation, and men’s control over women’s labour, access to extra household resources, and sexuality. South India’s gender system is different and the evidence will show that women’s ability to navigate gendered barriers do vary from the region’s classic patriarchal belt. While drawing comparisons I am conscious about the differences of the regions.

debates on women's inclusion have had different trajectories in these countries after the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and after Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 from Pakistan. However, there are similarities in terms of initially, women's main means of representation in local government was via direct appointment and later, mandatory gender quotas were introduced by the government. Second, in all three countries a 33 per cent reservation for women at the local level was introduced within the same decade (1993–2000). The reservations⁹ in these three countries have been in operation long enough for researchers to produce a rich body of literature for the evidence review.

A desk-based review of existing studies on women in local government was conducted to collect and analyse evidence on intersecting inequalities. The review largely focuses on the literature on rural areas produced in the last three decades. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive review of all available literature on women in local government in South Asia. Systematic but flexible search strings were used to identify relevant literature. These search strings included categories such as women in local government in South Asia, intersectionality in local government, caste in local government, etc. Apart from academic sources, relevant reports by international organisations such as UNWomen, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), CARE, and national organisations such as the Aurat Foundation were consulted. In selecting literature, preference was given to national level or multisite studies, although single site cases were also included for analysis if these contained detailed analysis of intersectional inequality. Sources were also identified from pioneering work produced by feminist scholars working on women in politics or local government. These include research conducted by Najma Chowdhury, Mary E. John, Nivedita Menon, and Shirin Rai, and also pieces that are 'survey of surveys' such as those produced by Nirja G. Jayal (2006). The common themes for analysis used in the paper were developed inductively from the review.

It should be noted that the nature, methods used and quality of evidence collected in the broader literature varies. In terms of methods used, surveys, qualitative studies, and evaluation studies were the main sources of evidence for India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Some studies on India have employed randomised control trials where the nature of the quota system allows for experiments. The majority of the studies explored the perceptions and experiences of elected women representatives but some of these studies also explored the views of the community and local level officials on women's representation. Some studies also contain ethnographic data and data on actual measures undertaken by the local government in specific communities.

In spite of the large body of literature that exists on women in local government in South Asia, there are gaps which create specific challenges in examining minority women's experience and agency using an intersectional lens. There is lack of quantitative data on specific types of intersections of gender and other identities. Studies on India largely consider intersections of gender and caste (Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST)) and how these intersections influence women's representation and participation in politics. Class (analysed by using landholdings or income), and to a very small extent religious identity, are considered in the literature on women in local government in India. However, there are data gaps – the data on religious minority women is largely anecdotal. Literature on women in politics in Bangladesh in most cases considers class as a socioeconomic variable (i.e. focusing on income or landholding of the household) and to some extent kin groups (*gosthi*), but not other forms of identities – such as religious or ethnic minority women. The evidence contained in the literature on Bangladesh on these specific intersections with gender is anecdotal. The literature on women in politics in Pakistan to some extent considers class (through exploring household income and landholding), and

⁹ In Pakistan, the provision for 33 per cent reservation lapsed in 2010. Currently each province has its own system for quotas in local government.

location (i.e. difference between provinces). Only a few pieces focus on specific geographical locations where tribal identity plays an important role and how this may intersect with gender. Compared to the body of work on women in politics that exists on India and to some extent Bangladesh, the literature on Pakistan contains fewer details that explicitly focus on how other forms of identity influence women's role in local level politics. The limited nature of the information on the specific types of intersections of gender with various identity markers in the literature on Bangladesh and Pakistan creates a challenge for drawing region-specific conclusions on the questions posed through a secondary review. This indicates that there is a need for primary research on various forms of intersections and the challenges faced by minority women (see also Section 5).

The other major challenge that emerges is that there is a lack of consistency in the broader literature in terms of how women's agency and participation are defined and interpreted and women's influence in local governance process is measured. The studies define these terms differently. In order to mitigate this problem, where possible I distinguish the difference between participation and influence (see Section 4 and Table 4.1).

3 Women in local government in South Asia: a brief overview

The evolution of reservations for women in local government in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan went through three distinct phases (Rai 2005). The first phase was immediately after gaining independence, when these countries were formulating their constitution. In India, caste-based reservations were introduced, but the notion of reservations for women was opposed both by the lawmakers and the women's movement actors, albeit on different grounds (Menon 2000).¹⁰ In Pakistan, the 1956 Constitution provided for a minimum of three per cent reservation for women at all levels of government (Bari 2000). In Bangladesh, the first constitution, promulgated in 1972, did not provide for reservations at the local level. During the second phase, the decades of 1970s and 1980s, quota politics for women gained ground in all three countries. The Commission on the Status of Women in India, established in 1972, recommended reservation of seats for women in local government. In 1993, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution led to the provision of 33 per cent reserved seats for women in local government (Menon 2000; Rai 1999). In Bangladesh, two seats were initially reserved at the union level for women in the late 1970s and the number of reserved seats was later increased, to which women were nominated. In 1993, one third of seats were reserved for women and in 1997 direct elections were introduced to these seats (Panday 2008). Special representation for women existed in Pakistan in the late 1970s; however, not all provinces had them and these provisions lapsed during different periods (Khattak 2010). A 33 per cent reservation for women at all levels of local government was introduced in 2000 through a devolution order. Women are directly elected to the lowest tier (union) and selected to the other two tiers. This quota regime lapsed in 2010, and now provinces have their own system of reservation.¹¹

¹⁰ Women's movement actors argued against the quota on the grounds that a quota system would undermine women's political equality with men by signalling that women need special treatment. The lawmakers objected to a gender quota on the basis that women were not a social category as with caste groups or religious groups but cut across these social cleavages.

¹¹ Not all provinces have a 33 per cent quota.

Table 3.1 Quota system at a glance

Category	India	Pakistan	Bangladesh
Year mandatory quota introduced	1993; constitutional amendment	2000; Devolution Power Plan	Legislative change in 1993
Nature of the quota	33% at all levels of local government; and 33% of headships reserved for women	33% of the seats were reserved for women at all levels	Reservation of one third of the seats (25% of the total); each reserved seat is constituted of three general wards; women to head one third of all development committees
Tier within local government	Three tiers: union, block, <i>zila</i> (district)	Three tiers: union, <i>tehsil</i> (subdistrict), <i>zila</i>	Three tiers: union, <i>upazila</i> (subdistrict), <i>zila</i>
Other groups with quota in local government	Reservations for SCs and STs	One minority member at the union level; also reserved seats for peasants/workers	No
Direct election/selection	Women directly elected	Women were directly elected to the Union Council; and nominated to the other 2 tiers. At present provinces have different systems	Women were directly elected
Election based on party ticket	No, but in practice party affiliation matters	No, but in practice party affiliation matters	Initially no, in practice party affiliation mattered, and parties are allowed to contest from 2015

Source: Rai (2005); Khattak (2010); Panday (2008).

In the current phase, the quota regime operates in all of the three countries but they differ in the following manner. In India there is a system of ward rotation where the constituencies that are reserved for women are changed every election cycle. It is argued that the rotation system allows for the circulation of benefits geographically. In Bangladesh, reserved seats (wards) for women are three times larger than the general seats. This is because three general wards constitute a reserved seat. Each of the general wards also has an elected representative. In Pakistan, at the moment there are different systems of quotas operating at the provincial level. In Baluchistan, a village or villages compose a union (each union has a population of about 7,000–10,000) and there is a 33 per cent quota for women in each union. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (former North-West Frontier Province (NWFP)), there are multimember blocks (each block has a population of about 2,000–10,000) and two women are indirectly elected to each council. In Punjab, two women are indirectly elected to the Union Council, which comprises six wards and in Sindh, two women are indirectly elected to each council composed of four wards. Table 3.1 provides a brief overview of the quota regime in the region.

4 Intersecting inequalities in practice

Most of the studies on local government in the three countries have shown that without the quota, women's presence would have been low in local government. Women's gender tends

to undermine their electability but their electability is also affected by other identities. As stated in Section 1, in order to examine how intersecting inequalities operate in practice and influence women's representation and participation, I will examine what the literature states on women's ability to: (a) stand for elections; (b) participate in the process of governing; (c) represent group interests and secure benefits for women and their community/social group. And wherever possible, I will compare whether the experience of minority women in local government is different from that of women belonging to the dominant groups and with men from their own communities. I will also highlight the contradictions that exist within the literature to illustrate the complex ways these intersecting inequalities operate.

4.1 Women contesting in elections and intersecting inequalities

The first issue I explore is: How do intersecting identities influence women's ability to participate in elections? Are minority women particularly disadvantaged by the multiple forms of identity that they embody? The profile of women leaders that emerge from multisite studies¹² conducted in the three countries has striking similarities. Women elected to local government bodies (the lowest tier) largely tend to be younger (under 45), with little or no education and engaged as homemakers, and be relatively new to politics (Buch 2000; Reyes 2002; Bari and Khan 2001; Jayal 2006; Frankl 2004; Aurat Foundation 2005; Jabeen and Jadoon 2009; UNWomen and ICRW 2012; Panday 2013; Girard 2015). The studies listed here argue that age, and lack of education and experience create specific forms of barriers when women enter political office. Undeniably, in the South Asian context any of these aspects will create difficulties for any woman (or man) in politics. One point should be made about the average age of elected women representatives. Apart from age hierarchy that exists in South Asia, for women of reproductive age, childcare and unpaid care work will create difficulties as they have to juggle both public engagements and household responsibilities. Apart from age, education, experience and occupation, what are the other forms of identity markers that shape women's experience in contesting local elections?

As stated earlier, caste and class emerge as key variables shaping women's opportunities to run for elections in India. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, class and kin groups were key determinants. Jayal's (2006) 'survey of surveys' on India reveals that the 40 per cent or more of the elected women representatives in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh (UP) were below the poverty line. The same study also revealed that MP, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Orissa had a large number of elected women representatives from backward castes. These results indicate that in terms of contesting elections, a large number of backward caste women in India were able to take advantage of the quota system enacted for women and for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). In fact, Vysulu and Vysulu (2000) had argued that the dominance of the '*beti-biwi-bahu* brigade' (daughter-wife-daughter-in-law brigade) from the upper castes before quotas were introduced was broken after introduction of the quota.

Qualitative evidence from these and other studies indicates why after the introduction of gender quotas alongside SC/ST quotas minority women from these groups became of interest in politics to elite and dominant groups specifically when particular seats reserved were no longer available for upper caste groups to occupy. Studies also present evidence demonstrating that the resistance from the family and the community towards SC/ST women

¹² For India, the studies selected cover several states (for example, Buch's 2000 study covers MP, Rajasthan and UP; Jayal (2006) uses Kaushik's 1998 six-state study which covers Karnataka, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, MP, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal; the UNWomen's 2012 study covers three states: Orissa, Rajasthan) or several districts within the same province (for example, West Bengal in Bardhan *et al.*'s 2008 study). Bari's 2015 study covers national election data; Reyes' 2002 study covers national data and Jabeen and Jadoon's 2009 study covers several districts in the North-West Frontier Province (now renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), in Pakistan; Khan and Mohsin's 2008 study covers all six divisions of Bangladesh.

participating in politics was mitigated by the strategic advantage provided to SC/ST women given the specific nature of the quota system.

In terms of contesting elections, the above studies and also studies that focused exclusively on *dalit* women's experiences (Mangubhai, Irudayam sj and Sydenham's 2009 study of 200 *dalit* women representatives in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat; Devika and Thampi's 2012 study on Kerala), reveal that the family members and caste groups played a major role in persuading the women to stand for elections. This does not mean women themselves were not motivated to stand – many of them were; but cooperation of the family and support from the community were crucial for women to enter the political domain. This finding contradicts the common assumption that gender quotas tend to benefit women from the dominant groups with political connections (Jayal 2006; Buch 2000) in the case of India. The introduction of gender quotas alongside SC and ST quotas turned the disadvantage women faced in being selected as candidates (because of caste and gender identity) into an advantage.

How women from minority groups are able to utilise this advantage varies depending on the caste, region and the history of political mobilisation in the specific communities. Studies on Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, UP, MP, Rajasthan (Jayal 2006; Mangubhai *et al.* 2009) show that women from the backward caste groups are pressurised to contest as 'consensus candidates' by the upper caste groups. Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study shows how upper caste groups 'select' pliable backward caste women and pressure their families to influence the woman to run as an unopposed candidate for the reserved seats. In many cases, the upper caste groups use this tactic to exert class/caste control when their *panchayat* has reservations for female SC/ST headship. The authors of this study on *dalit* women (*ibid.*) show that in these cases the upper caste groups determine the membership of the entire *panchayat* and also nominate their daughters/wives as its vice president. These women are generally selected from a smaller sub sect of the *dalit* group to divide the *dalit* vote. This tactic is used because the upper caste groups are unable to contest a reserved seat on these specific rotations and they also want to prevent the election of a more vocal or assertive sub caste member. The form of pressure exerted is by exploiting the lower class/caste status of the woman and her family. Economic dependency on the upper caste groups (or class identity) creates further difficulties for women. Qualitative evidence from these studies also includes incidents where the employment of the potential candidate's husband was threatened, and the title and land deeds to the house being kept as a 'guarantee' by the dominant groups in order to force the women from backward castes to run as consensus candidates (*ibid.*). In fact, gender, class and caste identities of poorer women from backward castes are exploited by the dominant castes to 'engineer elections' (Kudva 2009), exert caste and patriarchal control, and limit women's political agency.

Violence against minority women who independently decide to run for elections is not uncommon. Various forms of violence is deployed to prevent backward caste women from running or contesting in elections. Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study on Tamil Nadu and Gujarat shows how this plays out during the election process and that women from backward castes are specifically vulnerable to caste and gender-based violence. In this study, about 13 per cent of the 200 *dalit* women interviewed reported they had been prevented by the upper caste group from filing nomination papers, and an additional 14 per cent reported they were pressured to withdraw nominations. Mathur's (2014) study on Rajasthan revealed that *dalit* women from poorer backgrounds experienced significant opposition and threats from upper caste communities after they decided to run for elections. Forms of violence used against these women included caste and sexual abuse, false allegations of 'immoral' behaviour, vilifying campaigns against their capacity to govern based on their gender, physical assaults, and destruction of property.

These contradictory forms of evidence suggest that on the one hand, intersecting inequalities have further marginalised many women. On the other hand, for some minority women their

intersecting identities have created political opportunities. They received support from their community and family to contest elections where their intersecting identities were an added advantage. Undeniably, how the intersections of class, caste and gender identities influence women's experience of the political space is different from the experiences of women from the dominant groups and men from the backward caste (Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Devika and Thampi 2012).

It should be noted that while many of these studies explore the experiences of women belonging to the backward caste, experiences of women belonging to minority religious communities are largely absent. A few of the studies mentioned above include anecdotal evidence on the experiences of religious minority women. Devika and Thampi (2012) explore the experiences of Muslim women in politics in Kerala, and John's (2007) study provides qualitative evidence on Muslim women councillors' experience. A key area of analysis in these studies is how Muslim women experience and deal with the community pressures to observe *pardah* norms. The Muslim women in these studies reported different types of experiences. Devika and Thampi's (2012) study in Kerala explored how Muslim women representatives belonging to the different political parties Muslim League, Congress and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)) deal with the kinds of pressures from the community as they move beyond their role in the private sphere and enter the public domain. Women representatives in Kerala affiliated with the Muslim League actively cultivate an image of being 'disciplined' women members of the Muslim community and conform to gender norms that govern women's behaviour. These women use the 'ideal' about sexual complementarity of men and the woman's role (promoted in Islam) to argue why women need to gain access to the public space, given that women's roles and issues are very different from those of men. However, their conformation to the dominant gender norms followed by their community means that they have to follow certain gender-specific dictates or limits set by the party. For example, the interviewees revealed that they followed the prescription from the party that women retire to their homes by six o'clock (albeit flexibly). If there were late evening meetings, they also had to ensure that their husbands escorted them. To these women, the importance of their place within the community as 'moral' persons was greater than their role/place within the political sphere. Politics was framed by the Muslim women as being an extension of their social role as 'carer' in terms of working for their community.

It should be noted that observation of *pardah* norms in the Indian villages is not unique to Muslims, and are observed by many elected women representatives from other communities (Jayal 2006; Mathur 2014). In fact Jayal's (2006) 'survey of surveys' reveals that for many rural minority women, regardless of religion, election campaigns were run by their husbands, kin members and caste leaders, as women had household chores to complete. Women, irrespective of caste/class background, generally tended to campaign among women (*ibid.*).

Although discussions on *pardah* norms dominate the literature on women in politics in Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2003; Frankl 2004; Panday 2008), the studies do not compare the differences in experiences of women belonging to different religious communities, other than providing anecdotal evidence (Sultan *et al.* 2016; Khan and Mohsin 2008). Anecdotal evidence reveals that Hindu women and women from tribal groups are less constrained by the *pardah* norms in terms of mobility, though all women, including women from these minority groups, tend to engage their husbands and kin groups in running election campaigns. Similar to India, qualitative evidence from Bangladesh reveals that family, class and kin groups play a key role in influencing women to stand for elections in reserved seats (Khan and Mohsin 2008; Panday 2008; Hassan and Nazneen 2013; Nazneen, Ehsan and Hasan 2012). The literature from Pakistan also reveals similar trends (Yazdani 2003; Shah, Aziz and Ahmad 2015; Fleschenberg and Bari 2015).¹³

¹³ There is anecdotal evidence from all three countries where women have defied their in-laws and kin groups to contest elections.

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, economic dependency of women (by proxy class) remains a key mediating factor in allowing women to contest elections. Khan and Mohsin's (2008) survey of 600 women councillors covering all six divisions of Bangladesh reveals that having assets or a reasonable family income were vital for covering campaign expenses. The initial attempts by NGOs in the 1990s to nurture and field poor women as political candidates from their membership have not been electorally successful (Hassan 1999). At the local level, women from landless families or from families below the poverty line are largely unable to contest elections in Bangladesh. As there are no sub-quotas in Bangladesh based on class, religion, or ethnic identity, gender quotas have not created the kind of strategic advantages for minority women as a group to overcome the obstacles.

Studies from Pakistan reveal that Punjab and Sindh had a higher percentage of women representatives from landless families (Reyes 2002; Paracha 2003; Khan 2006) compared to other provinces. Studies conducted in several districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa show that women councillors are largely from lower-middle and middle-class backgrounds; many women's husbands were in government service or other professions (Shah *et al.* 2015). The data indicate that class remains a significant factor that influences which women contest in elections in Pakistan.

While class identity is important for women to be able to fund election campaigns and women from low-income groups experience difficulties in this regard, class identity may mitigate other forms of disadvantage for women from this group. For decades, qualitative studies on Bangladesh and Pakistan revealed that in the case of women from relatively poorer backgrounds, their class identity may mitigate the *pardah*-related restrictions on mobility. Studies contain qualitative evidence showing that women from well-off families state that their education and class background make it difficult for them to contest elections as campaigning activities take place during odd hours and require direct engagement with men who are not related by blood or marriage (Aurat Foundation 2005; Khan 2006; Fleschenberg and Bari 2015; Sultan *et al.* 2016). Allegations of sexual impropriety and other types of slander against female candidates act as key deterrents for women, given that the cost of social stigma to the woman and the family is high (Jayal 2006). While women from all classes are afraid of sexual slander, women from local elite families in rural areas in Bangladesh and Pakistan are more restricted than poorer women by their class identity, because sexual and *pardah* norms are more strictly applied to their class than on women from poorer communities.¹⁴ This does not mean that sexual insinuations and violence do not hinder women from poorer backgrounds (see Section 4.2.4). The analysis here reveals that gender identity mediated by class may at times work against women from well-off backgrounds.

However, the extent to which minority women are able to take advantage of the quota system, given that they are less likely to face mobility restrictions, depends of the nature of patriarchy at the local level. This is particularly true in contexts where the nature of local patriarchy is very restrictive, such as the Federally Assisted Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. Studies conducted in 2014 show that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, traditional tribal societies, the gender quotas were not filled because women did not contest elections in all the seats (Aurat Foundation 2005; 2001). In fact, in 2015, the political parties in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had entered a pact where they agreed that women should not even be allowed to vote in elections given the security conditions (Fleschenberg and Bari 2015). The fact that gender quotas were not filled in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan indicates that unlike India, where minority women were able to enter into politics once quotas were introduced, in

¹⁴ Village and ethnographic studies and feminist literature on development show that poorer women tend to enjoy more freedom in terms of mobility and accessing space; however, this access that violates gender norms is not necessarily empowerment (White 1992; Kabeer 1994).

Pakistan quotas may not have provided strategic advantages to women (including minority women) where local patriarchal norms tend to be very restrictive.

4.2 Women’s participation in local governance processes intersecting inequalities

The above analysis shows a complex picture of how women’s ability to contest elections is mediated by their gender identity along with class, caste and other forms of identities. Questions that follow from this analysis are: *How does gender intersect with other forms of identity and influence women’s participation in local governance processes? How do women from minority groups participate in the activities of local government? What forms of exclusions do they experience while participating in local governance processes? Do their experiences differ from the experiences of men from these communities?*

Many of the studies reviewed here have used the following broad categories to analyse women’s representation and participation in local governance processes. These include (a) attendance in meetings; (b) participation in committees; (c) representation of issues relevant for women and their specific communities; and (d) engagement in distribution and delivery of resources and other forms of activities.¹⁵ As stated before, there is a lack of consistency in the manner that the term ‘participation’ has been used in the broader literature. This makes it difficult for a broad overview piece such as this to determine what ‘counts’ as participation, and in order to mitigate the problem, I unpack the term in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Different types of participation

Categories/types	Example
Non participation	Attendance by proxy – husband/male family members represent
Nominal/ritualistic participation	Regular attendance at meetings, attendance at local government committees
Active participation	Time spent on the job, voicing opinions, placing counter arguments, placing proposals
Effective participation	Able to change decisions (budgetary or otherwise), enforce implementation plans

The findings from all three countries have some broad similarities. Women in all three countries, particularly in the immediate phase after the quotas were introduced, experienced difficulties in participating in the local governance processes. These difficulties were a result of women’s lack of knowledge about the procedures, non-cooperation on the part of male colleagues and government officials, and restrictive social norms and institutional constraints (Buch 2000; Jayal 2006; Bari and Khan 2001; Panday 2013; Shaban, Shaha and Naeem 2014).

4.2.1 Are (minority) women participating? Trends in non-participation, proxy attendance and nominal/ritualistic participation

Proxy representation has been a key area of debate since the quotas were introduced in South Asia. Studies show that after the initial introduction of quotas the extent of non-attendance in meetings by female representatives was high (Jayal 2006; Chowdhury 2003). They also revealed a prevalence of attendance by proxy (i.e. the women representative’s husband or other male family members attending on her behalf). However, the prevalence of attendance by proxy may be in decline. Studies on India reveal mixed

¹⁵ It should be noted that I have created these broad categories to fit the diversity of indicators and categories used in the different studies.

evidence on women's attendance in meetings: they tend to attend meetings fairly regularly, and the prevalence of attendance by proxy is in decline (Buch 2000; Jayal 2006; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; UNWomen and ICRW 2012; Devika and Thampi 2012; Girard 2015). The reasons for non-attendance in the early days of gender quotas were related to women's lack of knowledge, self-confidence, responsibilities for domestic work, and livelihood-related work. Some women cited distance and seclusion (Jayal 2006).

The trend in Bangladesh and Pakistan in terms of women member's attendance in meetings is also mixed. Some studies show women attending meetings fairly regularly (Khan and Mohsin 2008;¹⁶ Shah *et al.* 2015), while qualitative evidence suggests that attendance by proxy is practised in many places (Hassan and Nazneen 2013; Panday 2013; Sultan *et al.* 2016). The reasons for non-attendance were similar to those mentioned by the Indian councillors. However, the studies on Bangladesh and Pakistan indicate that respondents stress distance, the need for a family member to escort them, and the cost of travel as key issues (Panday 2008).

In Bangladesh, a mandatory provision that women representatives have to be included in one third of all committees and women will head at least one third of the total number of committees, ensures women's inclusion in committees – at least on paper. Being included in committees does not automatically mean that women are active members. Studies (Nazneen and Tasneem 2010; Sultan *et al.* 2016) also indicate that the Union Parishad chairs are interested to include women in committees as women have less information about the functioning of the union and are easier to mislead and control. In Pakistan and India, since the *panchayats* and Union Councils do not have provision for a quota-based representation of women in committees, except for in Kerala, women tend to be excluded from various committees (Jayal 2006; Bari and Khan 2001). Kaushik's (1998) study showed that of the 600 women surveyed in six states (Uttaranchal, Karnataka, Haryana, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, MP), about 134 were not members of any committees and 65 were members of the health committee.

The evidence presented here indicates that while proxy attendance (including for minority women) is in decline in India and Bangladesh, the quality of women's participation remains open to question.

4.2.2 Patterns of (minority) women's active participation: time spent on the job, being vocal in committees, contesting opposition

While it may be that women's attendance by proxy at meetings is in decline, available data on the amount and quality of time spent by women members on local government work reveal that women's participation varies widely in regularity and duration. Jayal (2006) reports that in UP about 60 per cent of the women members devoted no time to *panchayat* work, and that about 27 per cent of the women representatives devoted about three hours a week to *panchayat* work in MP, Rajasthan and UP. Studies on India by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) and Beaman *et al.* (2006, 2008) show women *sarpanch* (elected head of the local government) being active in committees leading to an increased participation by women in local government meetings. Evidence from qualitative studies and surveys conducted in Bangladesh and Pakistan also reveal a mixed picture (Khan and Mohsin 2008; Panday 2013) in terms of women devoting time to local government work. Interviews with women representatives in Bangladesh reveal that they devote a considerable amount of time to addressing the various needs of women in their constituency. However, these activities may not necessarily be related to the formal functions of the local government and be more akin to 'social work' (Hassan and Nazneen 2013). This indicates a need to unpack how the role of

¹⁶ Self-reported in the survey.

women in politics is interpreted by the public as being an extension of their social role and the implications of this perception on how women's performance is judged (see Section 4.3).

The evidence on women's ability to voice opinions on budget allocation and development plans in committee meetings is also mixed. Khan and Mohsin's (2008) study on Bangladesh reveals that about 45 per cent of the 600 women interviewed have been part of various discussions in the Union Parishad including on union budget allocations. However, Union Parishad chairs have considerable power under the current structure and tend to dominate the decision-making process. In fact, recent ethnographic studies in North Bengal show that the Union Parishad committee meetings are generally held in a ritualistic manner where all members, male or female, are asked to endorse the decisions made by the chair (Hassan and Mannan 2016; Hassan *et al.* 2016). Ethnographic studies have also revealed that decisions regarding allocation of resources and development work are taken informally and the meeting minutes (for meetings that were not held) are sent to members' houses to be signed. The experiences of the female members in these cases are not different from those of the male members. Where the experiences vary between the men and the women is in terms of being a part of the informal decision-making processes.

For India, while older studies (Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Jayal 2006; Kaushik 1998) revealed exclusion of women from committees, more recent studies of West Bengal and Rajasthan (Beaman *et al.* 2008), Kerala (Devika and Thampi 2012) and Himachal Pradesh (Girard 2015) contain evidence that demonstrates women are actively participating in committees and development work related to drinking water, health, and children's education. Non-cooperation by the male members and male *sarpanch* in sharing information about the meeting times or information about development resources allotted to the union/village, holding meetings at odd hours during the day or in the evenings, and marginalising women during committee meetings were cited by the women representatives as key obstacles in all three countries (Buch 2000; Bari and Khan 2001; Jayal 2006; Panday 2008; Nazneen and Tasneem 2010; Shah *et al.* 2015). Whether women's active participation led to being effective agents (ability to influence and change decisions on budgets, development allocation, follow-up on implementation) is open to question. Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study shows that over half of the *dalit* women raised issues in the *panchayat* committee meetings; however, these issues were rarely followed up. The issues of minority women's agency and influence (the ability to persuade and change decisions, and follow up on implementation) are discussed in Section 4.3.

While it is difficult to quantify or measure the quality of participation from the existing studies, Table 4.2 summarises the broad trends using the categories developed for different types of participation in three countries based on the studies reviewed.

Table 4.2 Broad trends in different types of participation*

Types of participation	Bangladesh	India	Pakistan
Proxy attendance	In decline, but evidence mixed	Declined	Still present
Fairly regular attendance in meetings	Increased but contrary evidence in qualitative studies	On the rise for the states reviewed	Has improved over the years, but is challenged by the findings in qualitative studies
Being committee members and attending	Mandatory inclusion, hence increase, ritualistic presence	Increased inclusion in committees but contrary evidence also exists	Included on paper, but evidence on attendance varies widely by province
Active in committee	Mixed evidence, many report resistance from male members, control exerted by the Union Parishad chair	Evidence in randomised control trials (RCTs) show that female <i>sarpanch</i> active and has positive effect on women's participation	Varies across provinces, but many report reluctance and lack of confidence
Effective in committee	Impact not clear	Some positive trends in specific areas	Impact not clear

* Note: This table is based on the studies reviewed: there are regional variations inside a country which could not be captured here, also data in some studies are self-reported which makes it is hard to gauge what is actually happening on the ground.

The discussion above broadly summarises the gendered experience of women representatives in local government in terms of participation in local government work. *But how is this gendered experience of participation influenced by class, caste and other dynamics?* While childcare and household chores create difficulties for women to attend meetings and participate in local governance processes, qualitative evidence suggests that how women try to minimise domestic duties and expand time for political work may vary by class. Whether women are able to minimise the demands of domestic and care responsibilities depends on the following: (a) the extent to which other female family members can help; (b) the ability of the woman/her family to purchase market solutions (hire nannies and domestic workers); (c) the extent to which her husband supports the contracting out of domestic and care work.

The study in three districts in Bangladesh by Nazneen *et al.* (2012) revealed that women from lower income groups relied on their mothers-in-law and other female family members for childcare. Women from well-off families tended to employ caregivers to address these concerns; however, given women's economic dependency, their ability to do so depends on their husbands' willingness to agree to and pay for the arrangements. Anecdotal evidence from some qualitative studies indicates that the husbands perceived the cost of employing a care worker as a fair trade-off and an 'investment' for accessing the political space through their wives (Devika and Thampi 2012). This perhaps indicates that women who are able to afford a market solution may be in a better position to compete in politics compared to the groups who are not.

Apart from redistributing the care duties to another female, there are other factors that may enable women from lower income groups to participate in politics. Studies from India (Buch 2000; Devika and Thampi 2012) indicate that among the backward caste groups there is more cooperation between the elected women representatives and their husbands in terms of childcare compared to the level of cooperation that exists between women from other caste/classes and their husbands. These studies contain anecdotal evidence showing that after women's initial entry into politics there was friction within the family around childcare and unpaid care work, but the friction diminished in importance over the years (Jayal 2006). Buch's (2000) study includes instances where husbands were teased by community

members about who would make the *chapatis*¹⁷ at home. The examples provided in this study show that after the introduction of quotas and women's initial entry into politics, the husbands were non-cooperative and irritated by women who drop their contribution to domestic and care work. Husbands' non-cooperation also stemmed from the fact that they felt unmanned if they had to take up domestic and care work. This perception of feeling 'unmanned' by their wives may extend to other aspects of what women politicians do which could also be perceived as threatening – for example, having power and speaking in public – activities that potentially undermine male identity (see Section 4.2.4).

Buch's (2000) work on three states of India shows that elected women representatives from the backward castes received more support from their husbands related to childcare. Devika and Thampi's (2012) study on *dalit* women in Kerala shows similar trends within the family. Jayal (2006) and Devika and Thampi (2012) argue that the cooperative arrangements between family members (including the couple) have to be interpreted against the nature of the quota system (which has SC/ST reservations) and the social acceptability of surrogate elections (i.e. the man's initiative to elect his wife or mother). While it is easier for women from a marginalised background to secure their husband's support for childcare compared to women from well-off backgrounds, in the majority of cases other forms of unpaid care work still remains a woman's responsibility. This means that increased cooperation from the husband around childcare does not lead to a transition of the gender power order or equal distribution of care responsibilities within the backward caste households (Mathur 2014). The care burden and the inability to buy in market solutions may limit the ability of women from backward caste groups to attend meetings, engage in committee work and participate in local governance processes. Apart from the burden of unpaid care, and lack of access to market solutions, institutional provisions that do not take into account women's lived realities may actively place minority women in a disadvantaged position. For example, the two-child norm that debars women from running for *panchayat* membership effectively discriminates against women who have no or very little control over reproductive decisions.

In recent years, feminist scholars have stressed that the lack of care provision may create a class bias in politics where women from lower income groups may find it difficult to take advantage of the various political opportunities created by the system (UNIFEM 2008). It is difficult to draw conclusive arguments based on the evidence that is available from the studies but 'careless politics' (Tadros 2014) is an area of concern if more women from the lower income groups and the backward castes are to engage in active politics. However in terms of policy in South Asia, childcare provision and support for women who are serving in local government, there is a vacuum.

Anecdotal evidence from Bangladesh suggests that class plays an important role, as it provides social and familial links with the elite in the village, which is crucial for accessing inside information about resources (Hassan and Nazneen 2013). While these links are important for both men and women representatives, for women these social networks are critical as their network and connections tend to be limited. The reason behind poor women's limited network is due to the restrictions on mobility, lack of education, and absence of 'conventional' political apprenticeship.¹⁸ *This raises the question: What may be the alternative for poor women in such cases?*

Studies on Karnataka conducted on the government programme Mahila Samakhya (Narayanan 2002), and also on Uttarakhand's Whole Village Groups (Sharma and

¹⁷ See Datta (1998), which is about all women *panchayats* in Maharashtra.

¹⁸ It should be noted that political skills may be learnt in many different spheres; however, traditionally in Bangladesh elected officials have been active in student, trade union, or peasant politics. These are not avenues where women participate in greater numbers. Many would argue that organisation of the poor by NGOs would allow women to gain political skills. However, it should be noted that by the end of the 1980s, Bangladeshi NGOs working in rural areas had moved towards an apolitical service delivery agenda and distinctly away from social mobilisation.

Sudarshan 2010) show that sustained mobilisation by collective groups at the local and regional levels equip women from diverse backgrounds with better leadership skills. These groups are able to act as pressure groups and mitigate the disadvantages of poor or backward caste women not having extensive social networks among the elite groups. However, whether these forms of mobilisation will work in other contexts is yet to be systematically analysed (see Section 4.4).

4.2.3 Exclusionary practices and the abuse of institutional provisions to limit minority women's active engagement in committee meetings and decision-making processes

Active practices of silencing, undermining, and humiliating lower castes and outright harassment and abuse are used to marginalise women from minority communities.

In India, *panchayat* representatives from the SCs and STs experience discrimination and exclusion irrespective of their gender (Jayal 2006; Mathur 2014). However in the case of women, this is even more pronounced as patriarchy and caste create various social constraints and hinder women's ability to participate in local governance processes. Jayal's (2006) review of evidence shows that women belonging to SC/CT groups experienced marginalisation in all states covered by this review. Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study on *dalit* women representatives in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat shows that *dalit* women are routinely not informed about the meetings, interrupted in meetings, stopped from chairing meetings, pressured to sign documents, and further marginalised by the practices of 'untouchability' (i.e. made to sit on the floor, not allowed to drink water, etc.). These practices – compounded with the fact that women from backward caste groups are illiterate, lack political/social networks, and the traditional caste and gender role that places these women in a marginalised position – led to women being less vocal and active in pursuing their own agenda in the *panchayat*. About 37 per cent of the women in the same study (*ibid.*) also reported active disruption by the dominant caste members. The majority of the women (about 90 per cent) in the study attributed their marginalisation to both caste *and* gender (*ibid.*).

Institutional provisions may also be (mis)used to discriminate against women from backward castes. The use of a no-confidence motion has had a gender-specific impact, although admittedly, the intent behind it was not gender specific. However, an interstate comparison of no-confidence motions revealed 'clear intersection of class, caste and gender' (Jayal 2006: 26). In UP, MP, and Rajasthan women from SC and Other Backward Classes (OBC) groups faced a large percentage of no-confidence motions (Jayal 2006), where these were used by male vice chairs to unseat women from backward caste groups, which demonstrates that the use of the provision certainly has been gender specific.¹⁹ (However, it should also be noted that male *sarpanchs* from *dalit* caste group also faced no-confidence motions.) Jayal (2006) also points to the absence of procedures for inclusion or subversion of procedures by the upper caste groups that were designed to ensure inclusion which limits the presence of women from backward caste groups (and also men from backward caste groups). In India, the presence of women members or SC/ST members is not a requirement of a quorum for the meetings. This makes it possible for the chair (in those *panchayats* where the chair is not an SC/ST woman) to conduct meetings with upper caste members and take decisions. Jayal (2006) also points out that the absence of women in *gram shabhas* (village council meetings), which approve the annual budgets of the *panchayat*, is notable in the states covered by her review. There are conformity legislations in some states that specify between one third and one fifth of the members as a quorum (but not necessarily along the lines of gender or other identity group members). Other states do not have conformity legislation specifying a quorum, which creates gaps. The Kerala model of decentralisation has tackled this issue in a different manner by introducing 'institutional innovations' which ensure women's presence in *gram shabhas*. Kerala requires 30 per cent of women to be present to

¹⁹ There are safeguards against such motions in some states.

reach a quorum in *gram shabhas*. Kerala has also ring-fenced a budget for women's development and requires the production of a women's status report from each *panchayat*. While these measures ensure that women are included, how minority women's ability to use these provisions to engage in decision-making on spending or challenging other opinions is open to question. Devika and Thampi's (2012) study shows that *dalit* women face resistance from other members (including women), and in their study *dalit* women more often than others had to invoke the 'authority of the state' for these provisions in order to assert themselves within local governance committees. As discussed in the previous section, in Bangladesh the provisions to have women chairing one third of all committees in the Union Parishad have not produced the desired result in terms of increasing women's voice in these committees. The institutional provision is misused by the Union Parishad chair to select women who may be more pliable to the chairperson's demands (Hassan and Nazneen 2013; Nazneen and Tasneem 2010).

The discussion in this subsection shows how social constraints limit women's political engagement and institutional provisions are abused by dominant groups to undermine women's authority. However, it also reveals the following data gaps. First, how minority women experience social constraints and how institutional provisions are abused to limit minority women's voice and agency in local government largely comes from India. For Bangladesh and Pakistan, apart from anecdotal evidence (Sultan *et al.* 2016, Hassan and Nazneen 2013), detailed case studies are missing. Second, the discussion on policy and institutional provisions in the literature on women in politics exists on a piecemeal basis or as single case studies (for example on Kerala). There is no systematic gender analysis of the different policies and their impact on women in the three countries, which requires a different framing. The absence of a systematic analysis of the impact of various policies is partly because the focus of the studies has been on women's leadership and women's entry into politics through quotas (Jayal 2006; Mukhopadhyay and Singh 2007).

4.2.4 Violence against minority women representatives to limit their active engagement in the local governance process

Familial as well as public violence limit women's active engagement in local governance processes. In all three countries, women in politics in general, including minority women, are vulnerable to the possibility of elevated levels of violence from the suspicious husband and in-laws – given that women have to interact with non-related males (Jayal 2006; Khan and Ara 2006; Mathur 2014; Fleschenberg and Bari 2015). Apart from the heightened possibilities of abuse that women experience because their behaviour violates the codes and norms that govern interactions with non-related males, anecdotal evidence shows that violence is deployed by husbands and extended family members influence the decisions made by the women representative. While women from all backgrounds face these pressures, the studies conducted in India on *dalit* women and ST women in UP, Kerala and Gujarat (Jayal 2006; Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Devika and Thampi 2012) include incidents where the husbands or extended family members of the female *sarpanch* had verbally abused or threatened them for refusing to sign a suspect set of accounts or when they contested views of the family members on how benefits of various development schemes should be allocated.

Women are also vulnerable to organised violence perpetrated by the opposition and the elite groups (Devika and Thampi 2012; Jayal 2006; Khan and Ara 2006). Violence against minority women can take many forms in local government. Physical violence, intimidation, verbal abuse based on caste, and sexual abuse is common in India (Mathur 2014; Devika and Thampi 2012; Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Jayal 2006; Kaushik 1999). About one third of the 169 women in the study by Mangubhai *et al.* (2009) experienced sexual abuse while carrying out *panchayat* duties. Jayal (2006) and Devika and Thampi (2012) point out that *dalit* women who are vocal in meetings and who actively pursued their own agenda in committee work often attracted slanderous allegations of sexual liaisons. An insinuation of sexual misconduct

or affairs is an effective weapon against backward caste women and for controlling their behaviour. These means have also been used to deter women from contesting elections.

Interestingly, how women are able to effectively counter slanderous allegations may have a distinct class-based dimension. Case studies by Devika and Thampi (2012) show that in Kerala, non-*dalit* women from well-off backgrounds were able to fight off these allegations successfully. These women were able to do so by using their 'education, refinement, and elite family background' (*ibid.*: 184). These strategies are not available to *dalit* women from low-income groups. In contrast, anecdotal evidence from studies conducted in Bangladesh and Pakistan show that women from the upper classes were restricted from engaging in politics by their families when these types of allegations were made against them (Sultan *et al.* 2016). However, the issue of sexual abuse and use of allegations of sexual misconduct to control minority women's behaviour is not extensively researched and requires further work in terms of how these impact women's entry into politics and contesting elections, and also their ability to perform their duties.

There is a policy vacuum in terms of how these issues could be tackled and ways to redress them – other than formal court cases. Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study has data on *dalit* women seeking redressal for the various exclusionary practices they experience – for example, not being informed about meetings or allowed to take decisions, against no-confidence motions, etc.²⁰ Devika and Thampi's (2012) study on Kerala details cases that elaborate on how *dalit* women self-regulate their dress, behaviour and interactions, and make decisions about whether to challenge verbal or other forms of abuse to minimise the possibilities of violence. In using these strategies *dalit* women also take into account the networks they have within the dominant political parties they have affiliation with and also through their informal social networks. However, a research and policy gap still remains in terms of what kinds of support systems are needed locally that address the issue of violence against women politicians at the local level. Table 4.3 shows the different patterns of disadvantages women experience based on the different intersections gender has with other forms of identities for the three countries.

²⁰ See Section 4.2.3 for details.

Table 4.3 Patterns of exclusion and disadvantage by social cleavages

Factors that influence political agency	Bangladesh	India	Pakistan
	Key intersections of gender and other identities		
Care work	Poor women unable to purchase market solution, which limits participation; upper class women less affected by burdens of care	Backward caste women (poorer background) unable to purchase market solutions; some evidence of support from husbands for childcare but does not provide a sustainable solution	Poor women unable to purchase market solution, which limits participation; upper class women less affected
Mobility	Poor women more mobile; restrictions on mobility of upper class women limits political apprenticeship	Restrictions on mobility varies by region, also backward caste women more mobile but may be restricted to spaces because of caste norms; there are mobility restrictions on Muslim women	Poor women are more mobile than upper class women; but restriction on both classes on interacting with men in public in tribal areas limits political apprenticeship of women in these areas
Vulnerability to violence/abuse	Poor women more vulnerable to organised forms of violence and abuse at the hands of political opposition/dominant groups	Backward caste and class women more vulnerable to organised forms of violence, particularly <i>dalit</i> and ST women	Poor women more vulnerable to organised violence and abuse at the hands of opposition/dominant groups
Sexual allegations	Upper class women more vulnerable as family places restrictions on political engagements with non-related males	Backward caste and poor women more vulnerable; Kerala study shows upper caste/class women better able to deflect using their networks	Upper class women more vulnerable as family places restrictions; also in tribal areas/provinces women are vulnerable to violence from family members after allegations are made
Use of elite network for securing political benefits	Upper class women able to use these	Upper caste/class women are able to access elite networks; backward caste women (<i>dalit</i>) become politically important if their connections with the political party are strong; does not apply in most cases for ST women	Upper class women are able to use these
Use of kin groups for securing benefits/political access	Limited for poor women	Backward caste women are able to secure benefits/access where the sub sect they come from has a larger presence and also there are backward caste-based parties	Upper class women are able to use these networks
Political progression to next tier	Limited for poor women	Limited for SC/ST women	Limited for poor women
Vulnerability to no-confidence motions	n/a	Backward caste women (<i>dalit</i> women) more vulnerable	n/a
Vulnerability to ritualistic incorporation	Poor women (on account of lack of network, illiteracy) more vulnerable	Backward caste/class women (<i>dalit</i> /ST) women are more vulnerable	Poor women (on account of lack of network, illiteracy) more vulnerable

4.3 Representation of interests and (minority) women exercising agency

The discussions above reveal how intersecting inequalities influence women's ability to contest elections, their attendance in meetings, their ability to be vocal and contest dominant opinions in committees – in other words their engagement in local governance processes. The discussions above also explored the various forms of exclusionary practices minority women experience, and the misuse of institutional provision to marginalise women, and the deployment of violence to exert control over women's actions by the family members and the dominant groups. The review so far has shown that in the majority of cases intersecting inequalities have further marginalised minority women but in certain contexts intersecting (disadvantageous) identities have created strategic advantages.

So far, the discussion has largely explored the subjective dimension (how women experience their new roles) and also how the structural factors such as social constraints, institutional provisions, and class/caste position influence their experience. However, the question of representation has not been clearly addressed in the previous sections. This section explores: *What strategies do minority women use to exercise agency to overcome their marginalised position and exercise authority? How do they resolve or make decisions when it comes to conflicting agendas/interests (gender and other identity-based interests)? Which type of interest takes priority?* When discussing women's effectiveness or representation, I look at: (a) (minority) women's ability to raise the concerns prioritised by their community; (b) women's ability to change resource allocation for these specific concerns; (c) women being able to negotiate a solution with other members/groups; and women being able to follow up on the implementation of their decisions.

4.3.1 Do elected women representatives (including minority women) prioritise and address gender needs and concerns, and how are they perceived by their constituency?

Interestingly, in all three countries recent studies show that women representatives are slowly gaining a form of social legitimacy as representatives and their status within the community has improved. The majority of the literature focuses on whether elected women representatives represent women's practical needs and strategic interests²¹ (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Mumtaz 2005; Jayal 2006; Devika and Thampi 2012; Panday 2013; Mathur 2014; Girard 2015). These studies on rural areas show that women representatives have a clear sense of their responsibility, which includes representation of the practical needs of women in their constituency such as drinking water, access to health care, children's education, etc. While a clear sense of responsibility towards meeting women's practical needs is present among elected women representatives in the rural areas, they also recognise that addressing only 'women's issues' may not win them votes (Agarwal 2010). However, this clear identification of their role with meeting women's practical needs is distinctly in contrast to the findings from the studies conducted in urban areas in these countries, particularly India. Urban women councillors, where the electoral context is more complex, tend to argue that they represented the interests of all their constituents and did not want to be pigeonholed (John 2007; Nazneen *et al.* 2012).

In India, studies show that drinking water, education and health have received significant attention from female *sarpanchs* (including SC/ST *sarpanchs*); they have been active in delivering these services in their communities compared to men (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Beaman *et al.* 2006; Jayal 2006; Girard 2015). Interestingly, some scholars (Girard 2015) have argued that women representative's active role in these traditionally 'feminine'

²¹ Practical needs include access to food, water, health care, employment, and education. These can be delivered without challenging the gender power structure within the society. Strategic gender interests include right to reproductive choice, abolition of gender discriminatory laws and gender division of labour, measures against domestic violence, etc. – all of which challenges subordination of women and transforms gender power relations (Molyneux 1985).

areas of work were seen as an extension of their familial role (collection of water, childcare, etc.). A female *sarpanch* faced little challenge from the community as these activities were seen to benefit the community and did not encroach upon the traditional 'masculine' projects such as irrigation or technology. While women representatives have gained social legitimacy for prioritising women's practical needs and also addressing distinct women's issues, their perceived legitimacy did not strengthen the community's views on their ability to represent larger community interests or follow up on implementation of projects that are not linked to women. Beaman *et al.*'s (2006) study on West Bengal and Rajasthan shows that when using an objective scale women representatives (including SC/ST *sarpanch*) performed well or were at par compared with the male representatives. However, the women are judged against much harsher standards and they scored lower when it came to people's satisfaction about their performance and ability to represent the community's views and meet their development and other needs. Studies conducted in Bangladesh on the perception of local people also reveal that women are not counted as effective leaders in representing a constituency's interest (Sultan *et al.* 2016; Panday 2013, 2008). The reasons for this are offered as: women's lack of knowledge, dependence on the husband, limited mobility, and gendered social norms. Local people felt that these concerns are particularly relevant when women needed to deal with matters concerning allocation of development resources and property disputes (Sultan *et al.* 2016).

Whereas in Bangladesh and Pakistan, there is a general acceptance that female members have the mandate to represent 'women's concerns', their effectiveness in representing the broader constituency is questioned by the public. In Bangladesh, women members are active in *shalish* (arbitration) processes held at the Union Parishad on divorce, domestic disputes, dowry and domestic violence (Frankl 2004; Nazneen and Tasneem 2010; Sultan *et al.* 2016). In Khan and Mohsin's (2008) survey, about 41 per cent of the 600 women surveyed reported being active in *shalish*. However, the effectiveness of the interventions made by women members during *shalish* is a debated issue. Studies by Frankl (2004) and Panday (2013) show that the interventions made by the women members generally take into account pragmatic considerations rather than challenging local patriarchal structures. The general perception held by the local people is that women members would be able to empathise with the female victim and handle the delicate matters involved. This perception has strengthened women member's social legitimacy. It should be noted that the evaluation studies conducted of alternative dispute resolution system (*shalish*) reveals that women Union Parishad members in dealing with domestic disputes are generally sympathetic with the plight of women but their opinions and decisions are also influenced by the chair and how well the families of the two conflicting parties are linked with the elite power structure in the village (Hasle 2003). Male members of the council also take these into account. These studies reveal that while women representatives are willing to promote women's practical needs and rights, they are also influenced by political and social considerations.

In Pakistan, qualitative studies reveal that women councillors are involved in matters related to domestic disputes and implementation of the Muslim Family Law Ordinance's (MFLO) provisions on the second marriage and marriage registration (Shah *et al.* 2015). Women councillors in Pakistan have had conflicts with the chair of the Union Council over these specific cases. However in both of these countries, gaining social legitimacy has not necessarily led to women councillors having a more effective role in resource allocation and development work where they are in direct competition against other male members elected from the same constituency.

The discussion above highlighted the gendered nature of representation at the local level. It also revealed that women representatives tend to address the practical concerns of the women in their constituency. However, *the strategic gender interests of women, i.e. elected women representatives challenging local gender power structures, may not be a priority issue*. It is clear that addressing practical needs of women has not led to women

representatives gaining recognition as effective leaders for broader community concerns in the eyes of the public. This raises the question: *How does gender along with other identities mediate minority women's agency and their ability to represent group interests at the local level?*

4.3.2 Do minority women represent the needs and interests of their social group? How do they represent or resolve conflicting priorities/agendas (when it comes to gender and the interests of their own social group)?

There is a debate over whether minority women are able to effectively address the needs of their own communities (Bardhan *et al.* 2010; Ban and Rao 2008). The debate also extends to which types of interests are prioritised or represented by the minority women, i.e. gender interests or other forms of identity-based interests? It should be noted that the latter issue has been studied largely in the context of caste and gender in India, and the intersections of gender, class and religion is under-researched. The evidence available is contradictory. Some studies clearly show that minority women do deliver benefits to their own group and address concerns of women in their constituency. Beasley, Pande and Rao (2008) provide village and household level survey data from AP, Kerala, and Karnataka. The study shows that the SC/ST groups received benefits from the village councils if the councils had a SC/ST president compared to other villages where the president was from a different caste. Chattopadhyay and Duflo's (2004) study and Beaman *et al.*'s (2006) study on West Bengal and Rajasthan showed that this observation holds true for women if the council president was a female compared to when council presidents were male (including when female council presidents were from SC/ST groups).

However, other studies show that minority women fail to address concerns raised by women or push further on caste issues. Bardhan, Mookerjee and Parra-Torredao's (2010) study conducted at multiple sites in West Bengal shows that SC/ST reservation improved targeting for public benefits for SC/ST groups. However, the same did not hold for women. Having female reservations did not improve public service provisions for SC/ST groups, including in cases where there was a female SC/ST president. In fact, Htun's (2004) study on India argues that women representatives in the *panchayats* are effective in addressing caste and class-based interests compared to the interests that are broadly identified as 'gender equity' concerns. She points out that quotas work better for groups that are geographically concentrated, which does not apply to gender.

The reasons why *dalit* women failed to improve public service provision and increase distributional impacts of per capita benefits are detailed in studies by Bardhan *et al.* (2010) and Mangubhai *et al.* (2009). Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study on *dalit* women representatives in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat revealed that only 19 per cent of the 200 *dalit* women interviewed felt that they had a significant say over the devolution of the development schemes and about 59 per cent could not review the financial reports of how funds were allocated. They also reported that they were able to secure benefits for their community, which included small projects primarily addressing practical needs of their community (including women). These included ensuring drinking water supply, road construction, etc. However, these *dalit* women also reported that they were not able to push forward projects that would challenge caste or gender relations. These included projects on land reform or employment opportunities for *dalits*. The majority of the *dalit* women in this study felt that their decisions on development spending were influenced by many factors, including rigidly following the formal rules of allocation and pressure from the dominant class and local political parties that they belonged to. The influence of these institutional rules and also other players meant that the *dalit* women were unable to effectively promote the *dalit* community's interests, particularly the livelihood concerns of *dalit* women, which consequently had a detrimental effect on their communities. The interviewees provided the following reasons for failing to represent their communities: *dalit* issues were not being prioritised by the *panchayat*; they lacked knowledge about the schemes; the obstructions

they faced from the dominant caste groups, which included the blocking disbursement of funds and misappropriation of resources, delays in approving and implementing projects, and demand for bribes and commissions. Bardhan *et al.* (2010) provide structural reasons for women failing to allocate secure benefits for their own community. They argue that women representatives (including *dalit* women) are new entrants to politics. The arrangements that were set in terms of clientelist relations between the communities have to be renegotiated between the dominant groups and women *sarpanchs*. Hence the elite groups focus on the allocation of resources for provision of goods that they see as important such as agricultural kits, roads, etc. The delivery of benefits to loyal clients (from SC/ST groups) is not prioritised by the elite and the level initially falls when a woman *sarpanch* is elected.

Apart from SC/ST women *sarpanch* being new entrants to politics where arrangement of clientelist relations need to be negotiated between dominant groups and women *sarpanchs*, evidence from qualitative studies suggest that there are many other factors that influence the decision of *dalit* and tribal women representatives in matters related to public goods provision and targeting for benefits schemes. In Devika and Thampi's 2012 study on Kerala, the *dalit* women interviewees pointed out that rules required that they act neutrally and represent general interests. These women interpreted being neutral as responding equally to the claims of different social groups, which are set by the norms influencing welfare schemes. These norms are fixed from above and the women interviewed felt that these rules are too rigid. The interviewees pointed out that they try to bend the rules as far as possible but a blatant violation of the formal rules may undermine their position given that women may be accused of being biased or corrupt. However, all of the 200 *dalit* women interviewees across different party lines, except for two, in this study admitted that their primary commitment was to protect the interests of the SC/ST groups and *not* women. They openly stated that securing funds and benefits for the SC/ST people were one of their key objectives for being in local government.

In trying to 'bend the rules' the *dalit* women interviewees frequently had conflicts with the officials as they were not a powerful group. The strategies these women used were to evoke state authority and openly state that the welfare entitlements and reservations for SC/ST groups are entitlements guaranteed by the state. They also use political party connections, support from their own caste members in the council, bargaining with other caste members in the council, and using the support base and networks to create pressure on the *panchayat* and also the bureaucracy.

While the evidence on how minority women resolve conflicting group interests in Bangladesh and Pakistan is anecdotal, the studies in general show that elected women representatives do tend to secure benefits for their own social group. Recent studies on Bangladesh (Hassan and Nazneen 2013) show how women representatives access actors who are politically influential using their kin and regional (district/village) identities, to offset the obstacles that arise from being female, and secure benefits for their kin group and clients (Hassan and Nazneen 2013). Khattak's (2010) study in Pakistan on women representatives shows how women use kinship-based political and social capital to negotiate getting benefits distributed to their own identity group.

Overall, the evidence above also reveals that while minority women representatives do at times address women's practical needs, their priority may lie in securing the interests of their own communities. Apart from the women's belief that their primary concern is to secure the interests of their social group, their actions may also be influenced by pragmatic concerns such as following the formal rules of allocation or balancing the power of local level elites.

4.3.3 Representing the interests of women: is there a slow shift?

The discussions in the above subsections reveal that minority women may not always prioritise strategic gender interests of women and that in most cases they place securing benefits for their own community over securing benefits for women. However, this does not mean that at times minority women do not challenge the gender power structures and exercise agency to represent gender and other marginalised group interests. Studies show that women representatives' own perceptions, aspirations, ability and awareness about their role have changed over the years (Buch 2000; Jayal 2006; Khattak 2010; Nazneen and Tasneem 2010; Panday 2013; Devika and Thampi 2012; Girard 2015). Evidence from these studies and the discussion in the previous subsections show that women representatives are aware of the role they *could* play to address the needs of women constituents, and that the women themselves feel comfortable in approaching these women representatives. The quotas have created a space for women to enter the public domain in larger numbers and the experience of engaging in decision-making processes (even if it is ritualistic) has made women aware about the alternative possibilities *for* them and *for* their women constituents. However, the extent to which women are able to secure or represent the interests of their women constituents depends on the nature of local patriarchy and the social and institutional support they receive (see Section 4.4).

Evidence from qualitative studies conducted in all three countries show that women, including minority women, use their husbands and other male members of the family to negotiate with other males in the community, particularly on 'delicate' matters. For example, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan, women councillors engaged in settling domestic disputes asked their male relatives to discuss the issue with the men concerned and their families (Tabassum *et al.* 2014). The female *pradhans* (heads) in MP engaged in informal lobbying through male members of their families to gain support for meeting the practical needs of women (Jayal 2006; Mathur 2014). Admittedly, while these forms of engagement do conform with patriarchal norms and expectations, they also reveal how women strategically exercise agency in contexts where the avenue for women's direct engagement is limited.²² The evidence from Uttarakhand, Kerala and Karnataka in India shows that sustained mobilisation by local women in support of their agenda creates pressures on the local councils and the bureaucracy and also enables the women representatives to press for gender-specific needs to be met (Mukhopadhyay and Singh 2007; Sharma and Sudarshan 2010; Agarwal 2010).

4.3.4 Strategies used by minority women: constructing images and challenging social perceptions

The exercise of political agency by women requires a fine balance between exercising responsibilities as elected officials, and the social expectations about women's behaviour. These expectations are linked to the ideas about feminine behaviour and the extension of the woman's role as caretaker – from the private to the public domain (Girard 2015).

Devika and Thampi (2012) highlight two broad strategies through which women, including minority women in local government, exercise agency and authority. Given women's need to maintain respectability within the community, they try to articulate a 'feminine public altruism', where they 'project themselves as altruistic agents of welfare distribution... who use the gentle power of persuasion' (*ibid.*: 133) and not opposition or confrontation with the male authorities. This way of behaving is considered feminine as it is assumed that the agent is sympathetic, patient, affable and approachable – all of which are considered to be

²² It is hard to comment from the evidence whether the capacity of minority women to push for their group interest or women's interests is directly linked to the proportion of seats held by minority women in each constituency; however, the population size of the minority community and their relative importance to the political parties may influence the room for manoeuvre the women may have for securing benefits.

female virtues. This strategy is in line with the predominant development discourse where development organisations and policymakers depict women as selfless actors who are engaging in the public service for the good of the community.²³ Women interviewees narrated numerous incidents where they were able to put these feminine virtues into practice and manage difficult situations in dealing with the administration and community members. This strategy allows women *sarpanchs* and members to appear non-threatening and to minimise some of the challenges and tensions involved in being a woman in a powerful position. Devika and Thampi (2012) point out that this strategy may not work for minority women in all circumstances. It works well in dealing with administrative officers where patience is needed and the officer has to be brought on board. It also works well in building rapport with welfare recipients. However, in circumstances where the minority women need to assert direct power this strategy may not work. Devika and Thampi (2012) use case studies to illustrate that *dalit* women have had to abandon this strategy as it was ineffective in dealing with instances of caste-based insults, non-cooperation from male colleagues and administrative officials, or when the political parties they belong to pressure them to acquiesce to particular decisions around distribution of development benefits. Thus, for *dalit* women the cost of contesting caste and patriarchy remains high. Mangubhai *et al.*'s (2009) study revealed that of the 200 respondents, the majority chose not to seek redress when such instances took place. Studies from Bangladesh also reveal similar patterns for women from working class backgrounds (Hassan and Nazneen 2013). What remains to be seen is whether over time minority women are able to more assertively project themselves and exercise power.

4.4 Minority women exercising power: enabling conditions and factors

The discussion in the previous section on how the public views women's (including minority women's) performance revealed that the performance of women in politics tends to be judged harshly because of dominant gender biases. However, the performance of minority women is subject to even more harsh scrutiny by the public. Cleaver (2001) points out that women representatives are judged by the local constituency first on the basis of their gender, and then on the other forms of identities they embody. Women, therefore, have to deal with the expectations inherent within the social context of negotiations, which include frameworks of norms and traditions. This often means that women, including minority women, may be perceived as ineffective leaders by the local population and their male peers due to social and cultural beliefs that women are subordinate to men and unable to exercise influence in the public arena. For minority women, the social and cultural beliefs will extend to these women being subordinate to women and men from the dominant groups and to men from their own communities and their inability to exercise influence in the political arena (Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Devika and Thampi 2012).

Given the above constraints, what factors enable minority women's ability to exercise power and gain leverage? How can changes at the individual level brought about by women's entry into politics be sustained?

Studies discussed above show that at the individual level women representatives, including minority women, reported greater self-confidence, increased social contact and freedom of movement, and improved awareness of various social and political issues (Jayal 2006; Khan and Mohsin 2008; Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Panday 2013, Mathur 2014). For all three countries, studies reveal that most women reported changes in their status within their own

²³ The readings of women's role in development discourse are embedded in the essentialised ideas related to gender division of labour and norms of labour (Buch 2000; Singh 2006). Hence assumptions are made about women giving preference to matters related to family welfare and natural resource management (i.e. water). These assumptions about women's role are then extended to women wanting to make choices that are 'nurturing' for the community and the family. Assumptions are also made about women running for office for the benefit of the community, women being more concerned about the family and their immediate community, and being less corrupt.

social communities once they enter local government (Jayal 2006; Sharma 2004; Khan and Mohsin 2008; Panday 2013; Mathur 2014; Shah *et al.* 2015). However, studies also reveal that women representatives (particularly the female SC/ST *pradhan* in India) have to face the daily challenge of exerting power *vis-à-vis* the male members while also securing the support of the male members and public officials. Anecdotal evidence from Bangladesh also suggests that this is an area of struggle for tribal women in North Bengal (Sultan *et al.* 2016). The review shows that the following factors shape significantly the extent to which minority women are able to exercise power and authority.

4.4.1 Nature of patriarchy at the local level

While all the three countries are categorised as ‘classic patriarchy’, the nature of patriarchy varies widely in the different regions/provinces of these countries. Gender norms and customary status of women also vary widely in the different regions of the three countries. Evidence from multiple site studies in these countries discussed above shows that the impact of quotas varies significantly across different regions in terms of which women are able to take advantage of the quota system, and contest elections, and the extent to which women are able to engage in local government work and decision-making. Undeniably, women’s political agency is mediated by many different factors. One of the key factors influencing how women are able to take advantage of the provision for quotas and be politically active is the nature of patriarchy at the local level. The way patriarchal norms affect women is mediated largely by women’s class and caste positions in South Asia. Jayal (2006) points out that in regions where structures of caste and patriarchy (or class and patriarchy) are deeply entrenched, women encounter greater obstacles. However, in regions where the customary status of women is higher due to sociocultural reasons, for example in Uttaranchal, women’s engagement in politics through quotas is relatively successful. Girard’s (2015) study on Himachal Pradesh, and Sharma and Sudarshan’s (2010) study on Uttarakhand show that in regions where there is less restriction on women’s engagement outside the household – particularly with non-related males – and the space is available for women’s engagement in a traditional ‘male’ arena and in activities that are traditionally deemed as ‘masculine’, women’s involvement in politics tends to be higher once the quotas are introduced.

While studies on Bangladesh and Pakistan do not explore patriarchy as such, women’s comments on their class positions and whether this allows them to mediate the restrictions on mobility or not indicate how patriarchal norms interact with gender and class identity. For Bangladesh, it may be interesting to see whether this interaction between gender, class and local patriarchal norms varies between the more liberal ‘North Bengal’ and the conservative regions such as Chittagong and Sylhet. Data from Pakistan showed that the reserved seats in the tribal provinces, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan were not filled, which perhaps indicates that the restrictive norms about women’s public engagement may have deterred women from contesting in these seats.

4.4.2 Changing demographics

Interestingly, shifting demographics may create possibilities for women’s engagement (including minority women) in politics. Jayal (2006) points out that the Hill regions of Uttarakhand have experienced high rates of male outmigration and as a consequence there are a larger number of female-headed households. This regional specificity may have created space for women to fill the vacuum left behind by men, and women tend to be more articulate and assertive. However, there is a need to test this conclusion against other areas/regions where male outmigration is high and a large number of female-headed households exist.

4.4.3 Historical experience of women's engagement with local institutions

The history of how women have participated in local politics and engaged with the local institutions are important factors which create an important legacy that women are able to draw upon once quotas are introduced. Since the 1970s, in states such as Karnataka, AP, and Maharashtra, women have been contesting elections, occupying reserved seats (in provinces where it was in place before the Amendment in 1993), and actively engaging in activities of the local government. The existence of all-women *panchayats* in Maharashtra and Karnataka also created the space for building women's leadership skills, confidence, and social recognition (Jayal 2006). These *panchayats* emerged because either the women had taken the initiative or because the men in the factionally divided villages were unable to agree on the composition of the *panchayats*. However, the *panchayats* did reflect the local caste/class structure, with most women *sarpanchs* belonging to the rural elite families (Jayal 2006). While the latter raises questions about how significant this legacy is specifically for minority women, particularly from backward caste groups, the presence of these women-only spaces and the engagements by women in local government activities create a different kind of precondition for women's empowerment than in states such as Rajasthan or UP where no such historical legacy existed to challenge the entrenched gender norms once quotas were introduced.

4.4.4 History of sustained social mobilisation by women and women's groups

The supportive role of women's organisations and sustained organising by women are key factors behind building women's leadership skills, confidence, and voice. These groups are also able to create accountability pressures on the local council members and the bureaucracy on service delivery issues and act as a support base for women councillors. Evidence from India suggests that collectives of poor, lower caste and rural women mobilised by Mahila Samakhya, a government programme in Karnataka, played a key role in preparing women to contest elections, sponsoring candidates for reserved seats, training women for leadership positions and most importantly, enabling women in general to attend the *gram shabha* meetings and demand answers (Narayanan 2002; Jayal 2006). Sharma and Sudarshan's (2010) study of Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad (UMP), a network of 450 women's groups (Whole Village Groups, or WVGs, involving all women), shows sustained mobilisation of women over a long period has built women's political voice. The network uses strategies and rituals to encourage the inter-mixing of caste groups and collective activities ensure close participation. The role of the WVG has been in creating an environment conducive for women to be a part of the public space, nurture leadership and prepare women for electoral contestation. The network as a collective body is also able to act in ways to demand accountability from government bodies and state officials. In Gujarat, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has worked closely with women's representatives (including SC/ST background) and poor women's collectives to mobilise around the provision of drinking water (Sharma 1998). In Bangladesh, evidence reveals that urban women councillors place significant value on having close links with women's rights organisations, which allow the councillors to draw on their expertise and support when they face discrimination or when the councillors have to meet the needs of their female constituents in matters related to violence and the provision of legal aid (Nazneen *et al.* 2012). In the three districts covered by this study, women's groups are able to fill the gap that urban women councillors had in terms of lacking social networks. However, what should be noted is that the different forms of women's collectives discussed here were not developed on an *ad hoc* basis and engineered from above. What the evidence also reveals is that women's collectives play a significant role in creating women's political presence – whether government initiated or community-based or development oriented or more political. However, the key here is that the mobilisation has to be sustained throughout a long period and that groups focus on creating a broad base support among women.

4.4.5 Role of the political party and politics of vote banks

Scholars remain sceptical about the role political party plays in empowering women, including minority women (Jayal 2006). However, evidence from Devika and Thampi's (2012) study and also from West Bengal (Datta 1998) suggests that political mobilisation by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has been an important learning ground for minority women. It should be noted that CPI(M) is not a party without gender bias present in its leadership, ideology and rank and file. However, it is the experience of being active in politics that has empowered minority women and built their confidence that proved invaluable. Moreover, political parties are the gatekeepers in terms of nominating candidates, and political party ideology, whether minority community's support is required for winning elections, may shape the possibilities for women and men from minority groups in securing support from the political parties.

4.4.6 Institutional mechanisms

Scholars such as Mukhopadhyay and Singh (2007) argue that gender quotas are one set of mechanisms that aim to build capacity of women (including minority women) from above. They point out that given that women are not homogeneous and their interests are not solely influenced by their gender, constructing women's (including minority women's) political competencies requires additional supportive measures. There are various institutional innovations that have been implemented in different parts of South Asia and other parts of the world. These 'innovations' (*ibid.* 2007) include participatory budgeting (gender budgeting in Nepal and Brazil at the local level), provisions that require women's presence to reach quorums (Kerala), ring-fencing funds for women's development projects (Kerala), and public hearings on the performance of the local government on gender equality concerns (Rwanda). All of these have the potential for changing relationships between women citizens, women council members and the local government. In Rajasthan, the role played by Majdur Kishan Sramik Samity (MKSS) in arranging public hearings, or the initiatives by CARE Bangladesh to arrange ward *shobhas* (meetings) and ensuring the participation of women, demonstrate that these measures are able to amplify women's voice at the local level and create a constituency that enables women members to respond to public demands on gender-related concerns. However, these accountability mechanisms only work if there is sustained engagement on these by civil society organisations (CSOs), and when the elite capture of these mechanisms is contained, and public officials are made to answer on gender equality concerns.

5 Intersecting inequalities and gender: research, policy, programme gaps

The discussion above reveals how intersectional inequalities influence women's representation and participation in local government. The discussion provides a nuanced analysis of how elected women representatives from different social and economic backgrounds are able to take up the opportunities for participating in local governance processes and how women represent the different interests of their communities. What do these findings mean for the policymakers and researchers interested in women's representation and gender equality in local governance?

First, undoubtedly, for the three countries, quotas created an opportunity for women from diverse backgrounds to enter the political arena. Data from unreserved seats in India and data from Pakistan and Bangladesh from the period when reservations did not exist show that without quotas, women's representation would have been very low. Undeniably, in India the system of reservations for SC/ST communities has led to a significant number of women

from these communities entering local government. The quota system is criticised for failing to effectively empower women and for enabling proxy representation, and some have argued for dismantling the quota system. But it still remains the single most important tool for ensuring women's (numerical) presence at the local level. The question is whether the quota system that is in operation in these countries should or could be reformed? For India, the tandem quota system has enabled women from backward caste groups to contest elections and enter local government in larger numbers compared to their presence before the quota system was introduced (Jayal 2006). However, there are institutional provisions in local government that have gender- and caste-specific impact which requires reform; for example, the way no-confidence motions are used against SC/ST *sarpanch*, and the absence of conformity laws in some states, etc. For Pakistan and Bangladesh, class emerges as a key factor that mediates which women are able to contest elections. A key policy and programme gap in these countries is: What measures can be taken to ensure that women from poorer backgrounds are able to participate in local government as elected representatives?

Second, the evidence review demonstrated how women's unpaid care burden affected their ability to engage in committee work and local governance processes. The care burden in India adversely affects the ability of women from backward caste groups and in Bangladesh and Pakistan women from poorer class background, who are unable to afford market solutions. In all three countries there is a clear policy and programme gap on provision of alternative mechanisms for meeting the care needs of women representatives at the local level. Apart from the burden of care and its class and caste-specific impact, various forms of exclusionary practices and violence against minority women (particularly against *dalit* and ST women in India) emerged as key areas of concern. The review also highlighted that very few *dalit* women seek redressal when these incidents occur and when they do, in most cases they are reluctant to pursue the formal route and take informal measures (i.e. try to mediate through traditional heads of communities, or in some cases use their connections with political parties). Apart from formal redressal mechanisms, what are the different informal pathways through which minority women are able to mitigate these constraints? Apart from the Devika and Thampi (2012) study that detailed the strategies used by *dalit* women in Kerala, other studies largely focus on minority women's experience of these constraints. Systematic study of how minority women exercise agency in this regard and tackle discrimination in different contexts may help to identify some broad patterns. In addition, what kinds of programmatic support (beyond legal support and awareness raising) can be provided to minority women to enable them to counter violence?

Third, in the literature on women in politics and in development programming, women's political empowerment is largely understood as whether women are able to act autonomously from their husbands and families. In some studies, the extent to which they are able to act independently from their community groups and political parties is also explored. Given the history of how gender quotas were used by the families and dominant groups to capture the reserved seats, proxy representation remains a key concern for policymakers. However, the evidence discussed here shows that the involvement of the family members in women's political activities should not automatically be interpreted as dependency. This reading is simplistic and family support actually plays a paradoxical role, hence the interpretations of the role of the family need to be nuanced. For example, assistance provided by the family members in campaigning for women's election allows women to overcome constraints placed by gender norms that limit their interactions between non-related men and women candidates. In such instances the family plays a positive role. However, husbands and male members attending Union Council meetings on behalf of women will have a detrimental effect on women's capacity to act as an elected representative.

In South Asia, family members remain a key source of information and support for women in politics regardless of class, caste, religion, age, or marital status, etc. The family is also a key arena where women experience the most significant and insurmountable barriers to effective engagement in local government. For minority women, the support of the family and the community were key factors that allowed them to overcome difficult barriers in contesting elections. Their support was also crucial for them to participate in local governance processes. Given this context, researchers, policymakers and programmes need to develop a nuanced understanding of the role of the family in interpreting (minority) women's political agency. They need to move beyond interpreting any family involvement as proxy representation.

In interpreting the role of the family and the community, research needs to explore the relational aspect of women's political empowerment. Programming needs to move beyond building individual capacity (i.e. speaking skills, budget skills) in isolation. Admittedly, the individual skill building is important for minority women, most of whom have little education and limited political experience. But a focus on the relational aspect of empowerment explores the agency and power of the woman or man *vis-à-vis* their interactions with others. This approach allows for developing a nuanced picture of how political agency and power are exercised and where the trade-offs take place. A relational approach to women's political empowerment also allows for moving beyond treating gender as a category that focuses only on women's experience and assumes that experience of all women are the same. Relational approach opens up the possibilities for exploring how power is gendered and is experienced differently by the various groups of women and men.

Fourth, the discussion in the previous sections also reveals that there has been a shift in the level of awareness and aspirations of women representatives over time. Unfortunately, this shift in awareness has dissuaded many women from competing for representative positions because of a realistic determination that the personal and social costs of political careers are simply too high. Women in general – and minority women in particular – are keenly aware of the difficulties posed by intersecting identities. Through their entry into local government women's self-perception and status within the community has changed and they are now more aware of injustices they face. The question is how will this increased level of awareness influence the willingness of women to compete in politics? Some studies on Pakistan, Bangladesh and India reveal that many women are unwilling to re-contest elections (Mangubhai *et al.* 2009; Shah *et al.* 2015; Panday 2013). There are many reasons for women deciding to leave politics, which include negative experiences in local government, family responsibilities, pressure from dominant groups to not run for elections, etc. Whether women (including minority women) are less interested in re-contesting elections after they have served a single term needs to be probed further in research. In addition, a key area of concern is how to retain the initial levels of enthusiasm and interest among women. Moreover, research needs to focus on whether an increased level of awareness among women on how gender mediates women's access and participation in local governance can be used to create 'differentiated solidarity'²⁴ (Young 2000) among women representatives that cuts across the various caste/class and other divides. Mobilisation by women's groups across the different intersectional barriers (for example, movement across class/caste intersections) in this regard may be useful.

Fifth, the discussion in Section 4.3 reveals that women representatives are interested in addressing practical gender needs. Most of the studies show that the women representatives in all three countries admit that their remit includes representation of women's needs and interests. However, policymakers should not assume that an increased

²⁴ Differentiated solidarity means that groups are aware about the larger goal of attaining justice (in this case gender justice) and solidarity is built on this awareness, although the groups may have different interest positions. Differentiated solidarity allows for building wide alliances among diverse groups.

presence of women in local government would automatically lead to women promoting gender equity concerns. For women (including minority women), class- and caste-based interests are important. These class- and caste-based interests at times may be in conflict with promoting gender interests. Analysis of which interests women will prioritise and why, needs to take into account the multiple loyalties (minority) women have and the strategic benefits that may be secured by promoting a specific issue. In order to enable women representatives to promote strategic gender interests, public articulation of gender equality interests is needed. This means sustained mobilisation around gender equality concerns, engagement of CSOs and political actors on these issues. These are important as they create enabling conditions where women may benefit politically from addressing gender equity concerns. Otherwise, there is a risk that women may stick to addressing practical needs only or underemphasise gender concerns when they come into conflict with other group-based concerns. For minority women, the latter (advancing minority group interests) is a key area of concern as they rely on the support of their community for political survival. This means that there is a need to create alternative routes of support for minority women so they are able to rely on these actors beyond their families and communities.

Feminist research has demonstrated that links with autonomous women's groups are crucial for those women parliamentarians who promote gender equality policies (Htun and Weldon 2010). Jayal (2006), Buch (2000) and others have shown that mobilisation by women's groups has not only enabled women representatives to tackle gender biases within the local government but also motivated them to raise gender concerns. The presence of a constituency at the local level that supports the gender agenda is also important because it acts as pressure on women representatives to promote gender equality concerns, a role that women's groups tend to serve. The question is, how can development actors strengthen forms of women's organising and collectives? What can be other mechanisms of support besides provision of funds?

Sixth, the discussion above also reveals the importance of context in influencing the extent to which an intervention may be successful and how women are able to negotiate intersectional inequalities. Studies showed that in contexts where patriarchal norms are less rigid, where women have a long history of political mobilisation,²⁵ women (including minority women) were able to effectively participate in local governance process once opportunities for entry were created. This indicates that interventions need to take into account context-specific enabling conditions for bolstering the effects of interventions. This is of course a challenge for policymakers where there are no organic developments of a women's movement from bottom-up.

Seventh, there are clear research and evidence gaps that have been flagged by this review, and research on these areas may yield useful information. Research in Bangladesh and Pakistan on intersectionality needs to go beyond class. Apart from anecdotal evidence showing how religious and tribal women experience intersectional inequalities, data is largely missing. For India, research on religious minority women in politics is limited. Moreover, quantitative analysis could be conducted using regional data from India to develop measures that allow one to draw conclusions about the broader patterns of disadvantages for different social cleavages using a gender lens. There is also a need to explore what kinds of community level factors create political openings for women, and is there a broader pattern regarding this analysis that moves beyond village studies? Moreover, there is a need for systematic review of the existing range of policies (besides quotas) that support minority women in politics. Currently, the evidence on policy produced in feminist scholarship on women in politics exists on a piecemeal basis or as single case studies of specific policy impact, which makes it hard to provide a sense of what exists in the policy domain.

²⁵ See examples provided in Section 4.

Lastly, the review also highlights some areas of concern that need to be taken into account in policy and research. These concerns are not directly linked to intersecting inequalities but are nonetheless important. In framing the need for women's political inclusion, at times the broader literature have tended to essentialise women's qualities – i.e. women are aware about their community's needs, by nature less corrupt, good at negotiating compromises, etc. (Dollar, Fischman and Gaiti 2001; see Girard 2015 for details). Researchers have also at times leaned towards making these types of assumptions. For example, the case for women's representation has been argued on the basis that women are less corrupt. Results from some of the research work tend to support this assumption, i.e. the finding that women do not take bribes (Beaman *et al.* 2006).²⁶ (I am not saying that was the intention of the researcher but about how it has been reported by others.) Alternative explanations that women tend to be less corrupt because they are yet to develop their own clientelist networks are missing from this analysis. In explaining why women promote practical gender needs, the literature tends to suggest that women as women are more aware about their social role and gender division of labour. While women's lived reality has influenced their understanding of the needs that other women may have, the connection between this and women representatives' policy actions is not automatic. Women's public policy preference is shaped by their own perceptions about their role and social expectations about what they would do, hence they tend to focus on issues that are close to their domestic role (i.e. childcare, health, education; Girard 2015). Unpacking how these aspects influence behaviour has important implications, as women may receive less support for promoting policies that are traditionally deemed male-typed domains (e.g. irrigation). Moreover, political parties play a key role in influencing the demand for candidates at the local level. The majority of the political parties in South Asia do not run on progressive gender agendas (or for that matter progressive agenda for minority groups). In policymaking and programming on strengthening gender equity at the local level, a focus on political parties remains largely absent.

6 Conclusions

The introduction of reserved seats and gender quotas (in the last decades of the twentieth century) has substantially ended the numeric under-representation of women in local government in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. This review explored how intersecting inequalities influence participation and representation by women in local government. The review particularly focused on minority women's experience in accessing political space, contesting elections, participating in local governance processes and representing the interests of their communities, and specifically of minority or the poorest women.

Given the regional scope of this review, context-specific observations have yielded to regionally generalisable conclusions. First, the impact of women's entry into local government varies across the different parts of these three countries. It is clear from the evidence that the structures of class, caste and patriarchy are deeply entrenched and that minority women representatives face multiple obstacles because of these intersectional identities, or overlapping and compounding structures of inequality, humiliation, and oppression. In India, the nature of the reservation system – with separate quotas for SC/ST groups – has allowed a larger number of minority women from these groups to enter politics compared to the number of women present before the quota system was introduced. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, class emerged as a key factor that influenced whether women were able to take advantage of the quota system.

²⁶ Study on West Bengal.

Second, minority women's participation in the local governance processes varies widely and intersectional inequalities shape this in distinct ways. In general, women representatives face various social, attitudinal and structural barriers. These barriers are at times reinforced by intersectional inequalities and at other times these identities may provide strategic opportunities for women to renegotiate their roles. How effectively minority women are able to tackle discriminatory practices and structural inequalities is deeply influenced by the contextual factors that include the nature of local patriarchy, the history/legacy of women's engagement with local level institutions, their involvement in social and political mobilisation at the local level, and effective engagement of women's organisations with minority groups.

Third, evidence on minority women's ability to represent gender and other identity-specific interests is mixed. Evidence shows that minority women do seek to find ways to address women's practical needs; however, they may not prioritise securing the interests of their own communities over gender-related concerns. Pragmatic concerns such as toeing the party line on how benefits should be distributed or balancing the power of local level elites may influence their decision to prioritise between conflicting group and gender interests. This indicates that it should not be assumed that women will automatically promote women's concerns. Moreover, there is a need to unpack the multiple loyalties that minority women representatives may have and understand the strategic benefits minority women may secure by addressing immediate specific concerns of their caste or identity group, rather than their gender. Have greater levels of women's inclusion at the local level led to a spillover effect in addressing other forms of inequalities? At this point, it is too early to answer this question.

In spite of many negative trends such as proxy representation, class/caste and gender bias inside local level institutions; it is clear that women's participation in local governance is changing. Women in general and those from minority groups are more aware, their capacity has increased, and their aspirations have changed. Whether this change in women's perspectives and capacities can be sustained depends on how policies and programme designs take into account the intersections of class/caste/gender and create alternative routes of support for women so they are not dependent on their families, and are able to build wider alliances. Institutional changes are also needed for creating the possibility for articulation of gender equality interests by the wider public.

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