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Voice and Women's Empowerment: Mapping a Research Agenda

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The Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (RPC) uses the entry point of 'Voice' in its theme 'Building Constituencies for Equality and Justice' to explore how to make institutions more accountable and responsive to women. The 'voice' theme explores how women engage with policy change, alliance and coalition building to bring about accountability. This paper reflects critically on assumptions about ways of amplifying women's political 'voice'. Voice is associated with – even measured by – political expression and influence on public decisions. Both are hard to measure, so frequently a convenient proxy is used: the numbers of women in representative public office. This tells us very little of course about interest articulation amongst women divided by many interests – based on class, race, ethnicity, age, and so on. Numbers of women tells us very little, too, about political influence. Without a doubt, women's political influence as a gender will eventually be measurable through improved access to services and more secure rights. But it is not clear that more women in public office, on its own, will deliver this. Instead, this paper argues that we should move past the focus on numbers to ask what is being said, how it is being said and what is being achieved? This implies attention to how women articulate and aggregate their interests, how they try to shape public decision-making, and whether it makes a difference in women's lives.

Introduction

The Research Programme Consortium on the Pathways of Women's Empowerment (Women's Empowerment RPC) begins from the premise that the keys to understanding women's empowerment may lie in the intersection – or interactions between – women's voice, bodily integrity, and economic security (work). How precisely can voice enhance physical and economic security? How can physical and economic security build voice? What do we mean by voice anyway, and why do we think it is so central to agency? Why is there more emphasis on voice and agency instead of institutional or structural change as the means to empowerment? What works to make women's voice powerful and effective in opening up opportunities for defining and securing rights? This paper is exploratory and does not set out to give comprehensive answers to all these questions. Rather, it explores the logic behind these questions and reflects critically on the assumptions upon which they are based.

The paper begins by defining voice: a metaphor for powerful speech, most often associated with acts or arguments that influence public decisions.¹ After placing this definition within the context of feminist debates, the paper then asks critical questions about conventional ways of measuring women's public voice, and offers propositions towards alternative and additional approaches to measuring voice. The second section of the paper reflects on how women's public voice has been and is delegitimised both in terms of its content and its performativity. The third section of the paper focuses in on the issue of women's political representation. This section raises issues that are critical of the current preoccupation with affirmative measures to strengthen women's political participation. While quota systems and other affirmative action measures may



accelerate women's entry into representative politics, they may in the short term weaken democracy (or at least the relationship between constituents and their representatives), and also invite the kind of backlash that deepens societal prejudices and undermines long-term social legitimacy of women's leadership. The fourth section goes beyond the arena of formal electoral politics to discuss women's collective action and participation in informal or quasi-formal processes of public consultation. The section concludes with a brief reflection on the painful fact that a great proportion of the energy that goes into women's collective action and building of public voice may be devoted to shoring up gender role stereotypes. This is the case with respect to increasing mobilisation of women in conservative social movements, or as reflected in conservative voting patterns. Under each section the paper outlines relevant research questions for possible exploration within the Women's Empowerment RPC and beyond. The concluding section sums up this research agenda.

What is voice?

'Voice' is a metaphor for powerful speech, and this is most often associated with acts or arguments that influence public decisions – usually in public decision-making arenas like legislatures. While that type of voice (influencing public debate) has great intrinsic value as a sign of an individual and groups' enjoyment of democratic freedoms, it has been of most interest to feminists because of its instrumental value. Voice is thought to help determine whether women can attain a range of empowerment-linked outcomes, such as policy and services to support women's economic activity, to guarantee their physical integrity and reproductive rights, to improve their and their children's access to education, health care, and social protection, among other benefits. But this relationship between



'This relationship between women's voice in public debates and positive social and economic outcomes for women as a gender is not yet established'

women's voice in public debates and positive social and economic outcomes for women as a gender is not yet established. A few studies have tried to establish such a link, but the evidence so far has not been conclusive. For instance, analyses of the impact of women in politics on domestic violence legislation and policing (Weldon 2002), or on reproductive health and rights (Cueva 2004), have not found any direct relationship between increased numbers of women in politics and either good policies or good outcomes for women. Weldon's review of domestic violence legislation and the implementation of that legislation in 36 countries shows that the quality of national attention to the problem is not so much determined by the number of women in politics as the size and strength of the women's movement and the efficacy of the national women's machineries. Cueva's study of the relationship between women in politics and reproductive rights, notably abortion rights, does find that there is a relationship between numbers of women in public office and pro-abortion legislation. However, the numbers of women who are economically active has just as strong a relationship. Causality is not strongly indicated, and much more detailed study of a range of other factors is needed before any conclusive argument can be made. Factors such as the positions taken by major political parties, the strength of the women's movement, and the relationship between the women's movement and women politicians are likely to be stronger determinants of outcomes than is the number of women in public office.

Measuring voice

The strength of the women's movement, or the efficacy of national women's machineries, or the nature of the relationship between women in political office and women in civil society, however, are not phenomena or processes



that lend themselves to easy quantification and measurement. This is why the numbers of women in public office tend to be used as a proxy indicator for women's 'voice' – it is a conveniently simple measure. Unfortunately the popularity of this indicator strengthens the temptation to use other quantifiable measures that may likewise fail to capture the dynamics of the ways in which women and their male allies may seek to build a legislative agenda around gender equality policies. Thus the idea that women might be more effective in advancing women's rights when they are not in a stark minority has generated interest in detecting policy changes after a 'critical mass' is reached when women represent at least 30 per cent of a legislature. Although this 'critical mass' figure is widely used, it has been arrived at somewhat arbitrarily. The idea that it makes a difference at all has not been a testable proposition until recently, with twenty countries now having achieved a proportion of women in public office of 30 per cent or more.²

Qualitative studies about the instrumentality of women's voice have been more positive about the impact of women in public office on policy-making (Thomas 1991; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Kathlene 1994; McAllister and Studlar 1992; Norris 1996), and these can take into account the many factors shaping the impact of women's voice.

Relevant research questions

Acknowledging that numbers of women in public office is a poor proxy for women's public voice, what alternative or additional measures are worth exploring? Examples might include:

- Numbers of women voting and their voting participation rate compared to men;
- As a measure of the strength of the women's movement: numbers of women's organisations and a



mapping of the networks among them, as well as the resources they command relative to other civil society organisations;

- As a measure of the degree of shared commitment to a gender equality agenda: proportion of women's organisations adhering to the basic principles on women's rights articulated in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- Nature and frequency of contact between women's organisations and women in politics and their male allies.

Content and performativity: Why is voice such an issue for women?

The metaphor for voice as powerful speech refers to two aspects; content – what are we saying? And performance: how are we saying it? Voice is also frequently understood as how people articulate their opinions and is used as a shorthand for the expression of social interests.

Voice as content

There are two problems associated with the content of women's public voice: unreliability and ambiguous content. For women the content aspect of voice has been an issue over the centuries because women have been deemed to not have much to say that is of any importance in the public domain (gossip). Women's 'voice' has been judged to be unreliable, a notion that is present in the cultural milieu of many societies. Even worse, women's 'voice' has in the past been seen as the opposite of what male voice represents: reasoned argument, reasonableness – the basic



elements of democratic deliberation and civilisation, and therefore women's exclusion from political participation was seen as justified (Pateman 1988; Okin 1979). Carol Gilligan's work 'In a Different Voice' suggests that this presumption of a lack of reason denies women moral authority (Gilligan 1993). In consequence, some of the issues about which some women have much to say because the issues are a major part of their lives – for instance children's welfare, basic livelihoods and food crops, domestic violence, reproductive health – have for a long time been excluded from political agendas, not seen as matters for public deliberation or issues to be addressed through social policy, justice institutions, or economic policy. This experience of exclusion has inevitably led to the intuitive conclusion that it makes a big difference to have women present in decision-making forums in order to draw attention to and raise the profile of these neglected issues (Dovi 2006).³ We have to acknowledge that there is some merit to this argument. For instance, international war crimes tribunals never recognised women's experiences of war – and particularly sexual violence – as a major category of war crime and in some contexts even a genocidal tactic, until women prosecutors, supported by women's rights activists and feminist legal scholars insisted upon it (Steiner and Alston 2000: 1177–89).

However, this connection between women's presence in political decision-making and the pursuit of specific issues is, as we will argue below, a mistaken one and it has led to substantial confusion in the assumptions behind, and the impact of, quota systems and other special measures to increase numbers of women in politics.

Studies of the expressed concerns and interests of women in public office have shown that women legislators do indeed express concern and outrage over abuses of women's and children's rights to a greater degree than do men (Vega and Firestone 1995). Indeed, what is perceived



as an abuse of rights varies by gender, with women legislators more likely to be willing to protest and politicise practices that men may not feel as strongly about – for instance domestic violence, rape in marriage, female genital mutilation. Studies of women in public office suggest that they prioritise national political and policy concerns differently than men do, notably seeking to minimise military spending and showing more caution than men on issues of security and conflict.

The second problem with the content of women's public voice is that their assent to certain decisions – their consent – is seen as deeply ambiguous and therefore unreliable ('no means yes') because of women's historically and legally constructed lack of rights over what is done to them and on their behalf. Examples include a history of universal non-recognition of marital rape, and a near-universal history of husbands' absolute power to control and transact in family property, including property brought into the marriage by the wife.⁴ This is the deep symbolism behind the denial of the vote to women (their husbands consent on their behalf). Consent is of course the cornerstone of democracy and the concept and practice of representation: we have to consent (through the vote) to someone else representing our interests. Women's exclusion from the sphere of public debate is therefore a foundational one – women are socially constructed as not having the wit to consent to governance and representative arrangements, and democracies have functioned on the non-involvement of certain female citizens – some might say democracies are predicated on this exclusion. Though changes in voting eligibility laws have put an end to this exclusion at a formal level, it has been harder to shake off the legacy of the perceived political irrelevance of the needs and interests voiced by women.



Relevant research questions

There is need to interrogate arguments that justify women's political participation on the basis of content; on the basis that women's participation will ensure inclusion of certain substantive issues on the political agenda. Not all women (affected by an issue, or who appear to share a common interest) speak with one voice. Not all women voice concerns about and commitments to gender equality. What basis do we have for expecting this of women who assume political office?

The observations in this section about deeply embedded bias concerning the importance and credibility of women's voice suggest that there is much more to women's political empowerment than provision of the basic tools for political participation (the vote, access to public institutions and debates). What kind of investment will address this embedded bias?

Voice as performativity

The performative aspect of voice concerns characteristics of performed expression such as forcefulness and conviction, clarity, nuance, and sheer volume. Social convention in many contexts places a greater expectation on women to be silent or keep their voices down and not to demand attention, whether this be at home, in school, in parliament, at work, or on the streets. This performative aspect of voice can influence the credibility and perceived importance of whatever values or perspectives are being voiced. An even stronger determinant of authoritativeness is social position and holding the taken-for-granted position. These two often coincide, but not always. The politically representative forums for decision-making are still governed by 'standards of deliberation' that are biased against ways of speaking that are identified with women, as well as their ability to be heard (Young 1990; Tamale 1998).





This is only exacerbated by the fact that women's lesser endowment in terms of free time, mobility and money needed to participate in public deliberation also undermines the performativity of their 'voice'.

Women's rage at being silenced, and greater awareness about how patterns of social exclusion are reflected in social differentiation in opportunities for speech has prompted much greater sensitivity towards 'giving voice' to women in political deliberation forums outside of formal political institutions. Examples of these deliberative forums include public consultations, dialogues, participatory research initiatives, participatory policy-making exercises (such as developing Poverty Reduction Strategies), citizen's juries, and public hearings on infrastructure development plans. All these forums now make special efforts to include women and ensure that they create the conditions that enable them to speak. This euphoria for participation has arguably done much to assuage women's sense of exclusion and silence, but not done much for building women's influence over formal decision-making. This is partly because these participatory arenas are not tied to accountable decision-making systems in the same way that forums for political representation are. Other shortcomings include:

- There are few means of ensuring that those who participate are representative of a wide spectrum of groups of women;
- Those who participate often have no access to official documentation about spending patterns or the basis for official decision-making, and in consequence their capacity to deliberate is hampered;
- Those who participate have no means of ensuring that the real decision-makers hear their views and act on them.



Without a right to information, or the right to issue a dissenting report to the relevant decision-making body, many participatory exercises lead to disillusionment and are no more than exercises in political legitimisation. They simply legitimate decisions that would have been taken anyway, or validate texts that have already been agreed.

Relevant research questions

Measuring women's voice in deliberative forums:

Process can overcome content. We ask how many women participated. We do not ask which women, or what constituencies they are capable of mobilising, nor what hooks or entry points they have available for triggering responsiveness or accountability as a result of their participation, nor what their motivations are for participating, nor what they got out of it.

Does the emphasis on 'voice as process' risk replacing interest-based politics – a post-modern sleight of hand where being seen to speak, and being heard is more important than building a platform or an interest group?

Unpacking interests – or 'is a happy slave still a slave?'

If voice is to mean more than simply process; if women's 'voice' means more than simply giving a hearing to all women; if 'voice' is about powerful, directed speech that advances the social, economic and political position of the speaker, that articulates the revealed preferences of the speaker; if voice should be about building a platform or constructing an interest group capable of demanding responsiveness and accountability, then we will know that we are advancing towards it when collective voice, in civil society or politics, reveals some common ground between women as a gendered group. We would want to measure the impact of 'voice' in public policy-making in terms of a





discernible change in the position of women in relation to men (criminalisation of rape in marriage, gender equal property laws, equal rights within and outside of marriage) and in the condition of women (a drop in the maternal mortality rate, in the incidence and severity of domestic violence, in the female poverty rate). This is precisely where one would expect to see a relationship between 'voice' and other aspects of women's empowerment, such as greater control over reproductive rights or a stronger position in the market.

This brings us to the question of what needs to be 'voiced' in public debates – and indeed to the question of representation, for we select representatives to voice our concerns (representation will be discussed in the next section). Traditionally, political scientists assume that what need to be represented in public debates are group interests. Mid-twentieth century liberal feminists irritated other feminist viewpoints when they used Marxist theory to argue that women share objective interests as a gender. This did not fit with the subjective experience of interest identification and formation, and, notoriously, tended to minimise conflicting interest between women that stemmed from class, race, ethnic differences and differences arising from geographic location (Jonasdottir 1989; Molyneux 1985; Mohanty *et al.* 1991). Blanket generalisations about 'women's interests' unhelpfully essentialise women (Fuss 1989; Williams 1998; Spelman 1988). Yet many feminists have found useful Molyneux's distinction between improvements in women's context and group-specific 'practical interests' (i.e. improvements in the status of women in specific class, racial or ethnic groups even if that be within unchanged gender relations that limit their freedoms to choose to live in any way but as dependents of men), and improvements in women's 'strategic interests' overall (i.e. change in women's social, economic, and political position in relation to men, a change that would

'We ask how many women participated. We do not ask which women, or what constituencies they are capable of mobilising'



bring more autonomy from men) (Molyneux 1985). But even with this nuancing the ideological difficulty of speaking of interests after the essentialism critique persists, even if we talk of 'gender interests' rather than 'women's interests' in an attempt to escape the critique. Just as the shared identity 'woman' is contentious, so too is the idea of gender. For if gender is socially constructed then that process of construction is deeply contextual and takes shape differently in different places, and therefore what it means to work for gender equality can vary as well. This links to the discussion below on women's active involvement in conservative movements, in some cases articulated in the name of gender equality.

The problem of positing in advance a set of what may seem self-evidently objective interests for any class, race, or gender (inevitably interests are ideological, not objective) has led political scientists to set aside the concept of interests and focus instead on the expressed policy preferences of citizens (Achen 1975). Feminists encounter two problems concerning expressed policy preferences. The first problem could be labelled the 'is a happy slave still a slave?' problem. If women are locked into relations of dependency from which they have no realistic exit option, if they are also oppressed by violence, exploitation and economic marginalisation, how reliable are their expressed preferences if they have no alternatives (Fierlbeck 1997; Young 2000; Nussbaum 1999; MacKinnon 1987)? The systems for identifying policy preferences of supposedly full and equal citizens may not apply to oppressed groups not able to use their voice effectively because they lack the conditions for free, autonomous debate, interest articulation and aggregation open to others. This takes us back to the problem of the socially constructed unreliability of women's voice. The second problem has to do with the fluid nature of policy preferences. Policy preferences change as identities and social positions change.





An important factor that shapes perceptions about preferences is in fact the quality of representation. It is part of the function of representatives to shape interests and to try to orient narrow interests towards broader conceptions of the public good – or alternatively, to constrain the political identities of certain social groups to limit their demands on policy-makers. This is where women's representation in public decision-making forums becomes essential and inseparable from the formulation of policy preferences and interests. Melissa Williams calls this 'representation as mediation' – representation not simply as a job of aggregating the interests of a constituency, but of shaping their interests (1998).

Representation: descriptive and substantive

Hannah Pitkin's 1967 'The Concept of Representation' established the key distinctions needed to understand what representation symbolises, and what it achieves. Pitkin distinguished between 'formalistic' and 'substantive' understandings of political representation. Formalistic understandings are similar to the principal-agent contract theory: citizens authorise representatives to pursue their interests, and politicians are subject to accountability exercises in which they explain and justify their actions and face sanctions for poor performance (they may get voted out of office). Substantive understandings focus upon the ways this relationship works: politicians can 'stand for' something or someone (descriptive or symbolic representation), or can 'act for' someone else or a collectivity, in which case a more instrumental good is expected from the agent or citizen than in the case of descriptive representation. Democratic theory takes these basic distinctions into a wide range of expectations about the conduct and obligations of representatives (see review in Castiglione and Warren 2005). In feminist debates,



however, 'standing for' and 'acting for' are interlinked. The key debates have been about whether descriptive representation (getting women into representative office) can deliver instrumental gains for women.

For representation to serve the function of amplifying women's 'voice' in the sense of promoting women's rights or gender equality concerns, the very grounds on which those who are represented have their interests recognised need to be re-thought. In other words, the idea of the 'constituency' behind the representative is problematic in the case of women, or voters interested in gender equality. People voting for gender equality, or people supporting a feminist candidate, are not necessarily clustered in a territorially demarcated voting constituency – yet in most electoral systems, representatives are selected to represent a territorially defined constituency, not an ideologically defined one. Many variations on electoral systems attempt to accommodate this problem; Proportional representation systems, for instance, may not only allow for a number of representatives per constituency, but for the selection of roving representatives to cover larger territories and, in the process, capture votes for particular ideas that would not have the geographic concentrations needed to win majorities.

As a recent two-volume debate in the journal *Politics and Gender* ('Critical Perspectives on Gender and Politics', September and December 2006, vol. 2, issues 3 and 4) reveals feminists are increasingly mistrustful of measures to increase the numbers of female representatives in public office, precisely because this does not necessarily amplify women's 'voice' as a group with shared substantive gender-based interests. The mechanics of affirmative action can replace the politics of substantive organising and institution-building. This is so especially when quotas or reservations are filled not through open processes of competition that necessitate mobilising of constituencies and the articulation of a





platform, but by appointment by party chiefs or other power-holders. Nonetheless, neither method guarantees contribution to the strengthening of a gender equality agenda. Recent experiences with quotas where conservative parties are dominant, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and even in local French elections of March 2001 show that conservative parties have respected their quota obligations more zealously than have more progressive ones, resulting in the political ascendancy of women who are notably opposed to women's equal rights, and all the more credible in this position because of their sex.

Mala Htun (2004) argues that the actual mechanics of affirmative action measures shape the effectiveness of descriptive representation in producing the substantive, instrumental goods needed by the disadvantaged group. She examines the system of reserving 30 per cent of local council seats in India for women and also for excluded castes and tribes (these reserved seats can overlap, resulting in candidates that are both female and members of the designated caste or tribe group). She argues forcefully that this reserved seat system works well for an excluded group that is geographically concentrated and has clear group interests. For women, who are neither geographically concentrated nor concentrated in any particular class, caste or ethnic category, the physical reservation of seats is less effective than a party quota system would be, as women's interests are not shaped so much by gender as by a range of other identifications and experiences, and they would be best off investing energies in strengthening their positions within political parties.

These experiences suggest that we should move well away from mechanisms that only produce descriptive representation – where women hold public office mainly because they are women, not because of their political records, or their effectiveness in building a personal constituency. Instead, the focus should be on building

'For women, who are neither geographically concentrated nor concentrated in any particular class, caste or ethnic category, the physical reservation of seats is less effective than a party quota system would be'



women's engagement in the non-formal institutions for public deliberation, the political parties, civil society groups, and media associations that mould public opinion and shape interests. The challenges of institutional reform here are considerable, as some of these institutions are notoriously hostile to women's engagement at anything but the tea-making brigade level. In political parties in particular, high barriers are raised against women's participation, barriers such as overcoming masculine and class leadership hierarchies to win nominations as candidates for political contests, the high costs of campaigning, and the violence and crime that are intrinsic to the culture of politics in some contexts.

Democratisation of political parties and other interest-aggregating machines such as trade unions seems a particularly important project for women as the focus on quotas has produced an elision between the politics of seeking women's representation, and broader identity politics struggles. As Mala Htun's work suggests, women's efforts to engage in politics is not the same thing as ethnicity-, caste- or race-based identity politics, and these should not be confused (but are). An unfortunate consequence is that women's political empowerment efforts are therefore associated with some of the governance-damaging effects of identity politics. In a context such as India, for instance, where the ascendancy of socially excluded caste groups in politics is a sign of the effectiveness of reservation systems, the very purpose of political engagement has become associated with cornering jobs and financial opportunities for one's own social group. Pratap Mehta has argued, controversially, that using political office to provide, disproportionately, goods and services to one's own ethnic group, often using corrupt means to do this, has become the accepted route to social mobility in India (Mehta 2003: 117–19). This gives corruption a perverse legitimacy in the eyes of excluded groups, and also provides incentives to



voters to support parties that promise group-specific rewards, and not parties that promise to improve governance for all (Keefer, 2005). The role of the representative in shaping interests, in resisting, sometimes, the preferences of direct constituents in the broader social interest, is lost.

Are women contributing to the erosion of the representative function by expecting that women in office will bring rewards for women? We need a realistic assessment of what quotas are able to achieve in a context where politics are by definition clientelistic and patronage based, or where they are organised around ethnicity.

Relevant research questions

While there is reason to celebrate what quotas and reservations have achieved, the moment has come to face up to and critically reflect on how quotas and reservations can erode the quality of democracy. Here are some propositions as to why affirmative measures may have this negative effect:

- They can weaken the representativeness and responsiveness of governing bodies if the women are selected via processes de-linked from constituencies or from direct voter choice.⁵
- The women selected may be chosen not for their experience in campaigning, platform-creation, and governing, but rather, because of their elite and family connections, or because of their willingness to be party loyalists. For instance, Tamale (2000) observes that Uganda's affirmative action policy has largely benefited an educated elite minority of women beholden to the ruling National Resistance Movement, who therefore do not engage in serious self-analysis concerning their role in parliament, nor do they dare to take positions critical of the government, even when human rights and democratic principles are at stake.



- The women selected may have a shallow political apprenticeship and may actually have fewer political skills (negotiation, deal-making, situation analysis) than their male colleagues, they may actually be less good at governing, and if anything, more vulnerable to making errors.

Quotas and the social legitimacy of women's political leadership: not only do affirmative measures in the circumstances discussed above weaken democratic practice generally, but they can also weaken the case for women's political engagement and certainly undermine the possibility of long-term social legitimacy of women's exercise of leadership. The following questions are worth investigating:

- Is there any evidence that in the long term affirmative measures build the social legitimacy/acceptance of women's leadership?
- If such social legitimacy can only be hoped for in the very long term, yet affirmative measures are justified as temporary corrective measures, what does this say about the prospects for employing political voice as a central means to transformation of inequitable gender relations?

We need to assess the terms in which special arrangements for political representation of women is spoken of, or the regard in which these arrangements are held. People seem to view the issue of marginalised groups in terms of 'need', and therefore there will be little dispute over identification of specific categories of people experiencing social marginality (e.g. widows, persons living with HIV/AIDS), not necessarily political marginality, as many of these categories of 'people in need' are too narrowly

defined to translate into political constituencies. Yet arguments for women's political representation rest more strongly on political marginalisation as a violation of rights in and of itself. This presents difficulty in building social consensus on the need to enhance women's political representation. This observation is informed by a Kenyan study on local governance undertaken by Nyamu-Musembi in 2005.⁶ None of the local officials interviewed identified 'women' as a marginalised group, citing instead the narrow categories referred to above. Yet 'women' were the only category for whom special representation was provided for in District Assemblies proposed in a 2005 draft constitution. Backlash against provisions on women's special representation formed a central part of the fiercely polarised yet superficial public debate on the draft constitution, culminating in the November 2005 referendum vote that rejected the draft constitution. This experience further raises the questions below.

- In the absence of broad social legitimacy or acceptance, where is the impetus for sustained political will or bureaucratic commitment to maintain affirmative measures and make them effective?
- In the absence of affirmative measures, how is political voice to be assured for groups against whom there is comprehensive social bias?
- If local understandings of marginality are so concrete and contextual is there a case to be made against fixed lists of marginalised groups (e.g. in constitutional frameworks), and in favour of broad statements of principle that allow for local flexibility?



- How is this local flexibility to be checked so that it does not end up being simply an articulation of existing social bias?

We also need to take a critical look at the various forms of affirmative measures in terms of what degree of accountability can be expected of the representatives, not just by 'women' as a loose and amorphous category (Dovi 2006), but by their women constituents, by all their constituents, by the gender equality movement.

In defence of descriptive representation

In spite of the criticism of 'standing for' representation, Jane Mansbridge cautions against rejecting descriptive representation out of hand. Any marginalised group, including women citizens, need to have their own in public office:

- to foster better communication between the state and (marginalised) citizens in contexts of mistrust;
- to promote innovative thinking in contexts where interests remain uncrystallised or are not fully articulated;
- to create a social meaning of 'ability to rule' for members of a group in contexts where that ability has been seriously questioned or has never been tested;
- to increase the polity's *de facto* legitimacy in contexts of historical discrimination (1999: 628).

The first two contexts could produce instrumental goods for the marginalised group; the second two produce broader democracy strengthening goods. Mansbridge's distinctions remind us of the role of representatives in

shaping interests: even if existing women representatives do not defend gender equality, their presence in politics will raise the expectations of women citizens about the outcomes of engaging in politics, and may indeed remind women that they can expect more from the formal processes of authorisation and accountability that electoral processes represent. The participation of women in public office increases the legitimacy of politics and the viability, for a socially excluded group of women, of using voice in that arena. Mansbridge argues that when interests are notably under-articulated, non-consolidated, is precisely when descriptive representation ('standing for') is needed. There is less need when disadvantaged groups know what they want and can use standard forms of political interest representation (voting for parties, or forming their own) to articulate their interests.

Beyond formal representation

What issues arise concerning women's exercise of public voice beyond the arena of formal political representation?

Women's collective action

Women's collective action has pioneered innovative ways of using voice. Some of these are born out of social/structural factors that constrain women's exercise of voice outside of socially defined role-appropriate ways. There are several instances of women deploying these socially defined expectations subversively to exercise voice. For instance, the 'womanist' movements of Latin America that mobilised around the socially accepted 'motherhood' identity to challenge authoritarian regimes (Jaquette 1994). Other examples include women's societies, the art, jokes or songs of women or those with marginalised sexualities that satirise masculinity and power, women's self-help groups, all of which necessarily operate 'below the radar' of public



decision-making and mainstream culture (Tripp 1996; Scott 1985 ; Steady 2006). Women's collective action has advanced singularly important political and policy changes, among them regime change in Chile and Argentina, abortion rights in the US, and controls on men's drinking in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. But a frequently noted problem is the lack of further political impact beyond these single issue victories. Women from these movements do not necessarily move into representative politics, for instance. In Chile, for example, it took a long time for women from the pobladoras groups to move into political parties, same with the women's soup kitchens in Peru. In Andhra Pradesh, a political party rode on the coat-tails of women's extremely popular anti-alcohol movement, got elected, then did not include women in the committees monitoring the prohibition policy, and eventually abolished the policy altogether. In Kenya in 1991 the 'mothers of political prisoners' carried out a successful campaign which not only saw their sons released from detention but built up the momentum for the repeal of the colonial-era detention laws and precipitated the end of the one-party state. While the sons' political profile was raised the 'mothers' retreated into political oblivion, although their significant contribution to opening up of political space cannot be denied. It also helped to raise the national political profile of Wangari Maathai, at the time better known for environmental activism and now a member of parliament and Nobel Peace Prize winner. But the question of whether the resultant political space made it more possible for a gender equality or women's empowerment agenda to be pursued is a disputed one.

Relevant research questions

We need to interrogate the reasons why women's collective action has been strong on voice (mobilising, forming





alliances and raising the profile of certain issues) but weak on institution-building. Some possible reasons:

- A preference for flat organisational structures that do then lend themselves to apprenticeship systems for leaders or good command and control systems (Freeman 1972). More often than not they lead to the kind of leadership wrangles and bickering that guarantee a short shelf life for any emergent institutions and further entrenches stereotypes against women's leadership abilities;
- Possibly a paranoia around institutionalisation because of the need to retain a subversive character (the guerilla struggle for women's rights)
- Possibly a reluctance to build parties, and replicate the exclusive male-associated machinery of power – or does the diversity of interests among women make this a remote possibility right from the beginning?

On women's participation in conservative movements

In the West, women's voting patterns have been mainly conservative. Until recently a slight majority of women in the US, Canada and the UK, for instance, have tended to vote for conservative or right-wing parties (Mueller 1988). In developing countries, patterns are less clear, in part because of a lack of good sex-disaggregated out-polling data. In Chile it is well-known that women, until recently, also exhibited a preference for conservative parties but the pattern changes in presidential elections, where party is less important than personality and vision (Baldez 1997). Women's conservatism, if this is indeed a pattern, can be explained in a variety of ways, not least women's lack of education and exposure to ideas about alternative forms of social organisation available through exposure to



cosmopolitanism, travel, urban life, or women's rootedness in traditional and religious systems (Burns *et al.* 2001). This conservatism is linked to distinctive patterns of collective action, such as the 'motherist' movements of Latin America where women demand the state meets its obligations to defend the traditional family (Alvarez 1998; Jaquette 1994). Of course, in the process of engaging in politics from a traditional gender-role entry-point, many women engaged in these movements have developed a radical critique of state patriarchy (Jaquette 1994).

In the last decade women who opt for conservative forms of social organisation have come to acquire a much greater visibility and significance than before. This could be in reaction to threats to cultural systems in a context of rapid globalisation, which often takes the form of a retreat to 'the traditional'. Rigidification of gender roles and, in particular, a tightening of social norms on women's appropriate behaviour, is central to this process of conservative mobilisation (Joseph 2002; Kabeer 2002; Menon 1998). Women's reliance on traditional or religious institutions to supply social protection, health and education services when public systems fail (as they do increasingly in the context of increasing privatisation of state services (Bayliss and Fine 2006) may account for the attractions of conservative linked forms of interest aggregation to women. We lack good data on the extent of this phenomenon. We do not know in detail how substantial is women's membership of Hamas in the occupied Palestinian Territories compared to women's membership of Fateh or other parties, for instance. We do not know whether women's membership of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the right-wing Hindu party of India, is greater than their membership of the Congress Party. But there is a sense that women's engagement in these groups is a growing phenomenon, worthy of study.

There is some evidence that conservative or right-



wing parties have responded with more alacrity than secular or socially progressive parties to quotas and other measures to build women's public presence. Right-of-centre parties in France, for instance, did better than left-wing parties at meeting their quotas for women candidates in local government elections after the 2000 French parity law was passed (Sineau 2005). In Iraq and Afghanistan, strong quota laws for the first post-conflict elections resulted in the return of large numbers of women to representative politics, but mainly within the fold of conservative parties (Coleman 2006). We need seriously to engage with the argument that quotas empower certain elite or conservative women and promote certain interests for some women, possibly because conservative parties and religious interests may be better organised than others. These parties and movements may also offer a safe public space for the cultivation of women's leadership skills, hence the relatively high representation of women linked to conservative movements. Examples of such safe public spaces include women's forums in evangelical and Catholic communities, solidarity in women's prayer and social action groups, leadership training for women albeit in some churches only in designated areas of responsibility, and forums on mentoring and nurturing of self-esteem among young women.

Relevant research questions

In some contexts conservative forms of organisation may be the only avenues for women to take up public leadership roles (UNRISD 2005: 172). We need to explore the following questions:

- From the women's own perspective, what makes these movements/groups attractive? What benefit do they feel they draw from them? What is their vision of 'empowerment'?



- Is the participation of women in conservative movements and parties a reflection of the fact that secular parties, and certainly feminist organisations and ideas, do not offer women the institutional survival alternatives to dependence on men or on traditional communities that they would need in order genuinely to engage in a politics of gender equality? The personal risks and losses this would entail are substantial, and in the absence of strong women's movements, unsupportable.

It would be insightful to look at connections between women's participation in these movements/groups and participation in mainstream political processes: are women who are active in such movements/groups more likely to be mobilised to vote than before (or than those not involved)? Do they take greater interest in informing themselves about policy debates, or is this selective to issues that matter to the movement/group?

Conservative parties, religious groups, traditional societies or clans are in some contexts much better organised than secular and socially progressive parties. They will be in a better position therefore to respond to and institutionalise quotas. They may in fact have less resistance to fronting women candidates, in part because the candidate pool available to them are unlikely to be women who challenge traditional scripts for gender relations.

Authorisation and accountability – functional equivalents outside of electoral politics

Women's engagement in increasing numbers in democratic institutions and representative politics is without a doubt seen to legitimate these institutions. A number of states seeking to boost their democratic credentials have lately introduced quotas and other measures to increase numbers





of women in politics – often this is as an overture to efforts to join regional or international governance, economic or security organisations, such as the European Union. But at the same time as democracies embrace women as decision-makers, the scope of democratic decision-making is changing – it is being devolved to local levels or else exported to regional or international institutions. Alternatively, many of the issues normally addressed through collective decision-making are under the control of specialised and expert bodies with loose connection to public assemblies, and there is shrinking scope for citizen voice and influence in these arenas (Offe 1998). At the same time, a growing number of local, informal opportunities for deliberation are appearing, either in the form of private sector consultations, non-governmental work, or in the form of the revival of customary or traditional tribunals. These developments are changing the relationship of representation just at the moment when more women are becoming representatives.

'Citizens' juries, public hearings, social audits and report cards on public services – these can build women's engagement with power-holders'

A valuable response to this shifting arena for public deliberation and policy-making is to seek to revive, or to establish functional equivalents for, the basic formal requirements for representative politics: processes for authorisation and for accountability. Non-electoral representation lacks the temporal sequencing of and the clear mechanisms for authorisation and accountability; but these can be established via other means. Citizens' juries, public hearings, social audits and report cards on public services – these can build women's engagement with power-holders, public and private, formal and informal, and can re-invigorate processes of identifying group interests and authorising certain individuals or institutions to 'act for' individuals and groups. These same micro-level processes can begin to build responsiveness and a degree of accountability and, to a degree, compensate for the infrequency of elections and their incapacity to address governance problems directly enough.



Conclusion

This paper sets out to raise and explore critical questions around the assumptions behind the emphasis on voice as central to women's empowerment. In doing so, the paper has mapped out questions and made propositions that ought to be central to a research agenda on women's public voice. The emergent research agenda may be summed up as consisting of two levels: first, research that seeks to advance conceptual understanding of women's public voice. At this level the paper has proposed alternative ways of measuring women's public voice that advance beyond the conventional use of numbers of women in high public office as a proxy. In addition, the paper has called for interrogation of the much-criticised but still deeply influential justification of women's public participation on the promise of substantive transformation of the political agenda, given the difficulty of defining an identifiable set of interests that coheres into a political platform for gender equality.

At the second level the paper proposes an agenda for research that has immediate practical consequences for the range of current efforts toward building women's public voice. The paper has raised questions that call for honest albeit uncomfortable critical reflection on the ways in which affirmative measures may erode the quality of democracy and do little to create and sustain the social legitimacy of women's political leadership. This calls for either a new vehicle for sustaining political will for affirmative measures, or at least serious re-thinking of the design of such measures so as to balance between the short-term goal of achieving 'critical mass' and the long-term goal of overcoming social bias against women's leadership, which is part of a broader agenda of building a constituency for gender equality. The paper also puts forward propositions towards an empirical examination of



the reasons why women's collective action has been strong on mobilising but weak on creating institutions that endure and that can engage at the level of formal politics. Finally, the paper calls for empirical research that takes seriously the apparently increasing appeal of mobilisations that are framed around rigid and conservative definition of gender roles. Why do such conservative movements appear to be increasingly more successful in tapping into women's political energy than movements or organisations that espouse the values of gender equality?

The critical questions raised in the paper do not make for a comfortable research agenda, but it is definitely an agenda that needs to be taken up in any search for renewed understanding of factors that enhance or constrain women's empowerment and the role of public voice in the empowerment agenda.



Notes

- 1 This paper focuses on women's voice in the public sphere – in public decision-making whether in formal governance institutions (legislatures at national and local levels), with respect to informal institutions and informal networks and norms that shape the unspoken background rules of politics, and institutions that shape public opinion and cultivate interests (media, civil society organisations, movements, political parties). This paper acknowledges that there are other significant and inter-related arenas for voice: within the household or in the market, but it does not explore these.
- 2 See Interparliamentary Union database on numbers of women in national legislatures, available at www.ipu.org
- 3 Dovi 2006 usefully sums up the various justifications advanced in the literature for women's political representation, including the 'neglected issues' argument cited here.
- 4 Pateman refers to a 'sexual contract' whereby women consent to a loss of rights over their personhood in marriage, which is extrapolated to justify loss of rights in the public sphere of politics, since the sexual contract operates as a background against which the rules of participation in the public sphere are shaped (Pateman 1988).
- 5 This criticism holds to a lesser degree for Proportional Representation (PR) party lists systems in general as these are also not based on constituencies or direct voter choice. Party 'selection' or 'anointing' practices that replace genuine nomination of candidates and distort voter choice right from the beginning are



known to be weaknesses of PR systems with centralised parties. See Blais and Massicotte 1996.

- 6 Unpublished. For information on the project see www.ids.ac.uk/ids/govern/projects/CN.demolocal.GO0407.html



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