Political Participation of Rural Women in Decision-Making at the Local Government Level in Zimbabwe

Jeffrey Kurebwa

Department of Peace and Governance, Bindura University of Science Education, Bindura, Zimbabwe

Email address:

jeffkurebwa@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: The participation of women in local governance can be enhanced in all three essential areas: as voters, policy-makers and as members of decision-making bodies. There is need for policies that involve empowering local authorities and communities to develop strategies that combine the empowerment of communities and rural women. In order to be able to identify the needs of the community and to best promote social and economic development, local authorities need the input of their constituents to be able to best identify those areas that need addressing. Local authorities must encourage the involvement of the community and community organisations in local governance. The representation and participation of women in local governance is directly linked to the advancement of women and is a basic requirement in the journey towards gender equality. To ensure that the decisions that affect women's lives are taken seriously, women should not be passive bystanders in their own development but should be proactively involved to ensure that the socio-economic patterns that marginalise and keep them dependent are changed.

Keywords: Participation, Local Authorities, Decision-making, Rural Women, Local Governance, Gender Inequality

1. Introduction

The last three decades of the 20th century witnessed a significant change in women's share of representation and participation in political, economic and social activities. The role of women has now become discernible in every sphere of life (Carli and Eagly, 2001; Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010). These shifts have been due to the worldwide awareness campaigns through the media, feminist movements, better access to opportunities such as education, health, employment and women's self-fulfilment in contributing to the democratic governance process (Agbalajobi, 2008). Since the 1980s, several conferences, workshops, symposiums and debates have also been organised at the international, regional, continental and national levels to address gender issues and devise action plans. This increasing global attention to issues of representation and participation of rural women in local governance as reflected in the growing body of literature, statements at international summits and declarations, government policy documents and discourses, suggest that rural women have considerable potential (Jabeen and Jadoon, 2008). Despite this commitment and the growing interest

among women in taking part in the decision-making processes, women's representation and participation in local governance still remains very low in Zimbabwe (Ekou, 2006).

The level of development of countries is now measured by the level of women's representation and participation in local governance (Jayal, 2005). Although there has been some increase in the representation and participation of women in decision-making processes, the barriers to their entry in local governance still persist. In Zimbabwe, rural women continue to be marginalised in political and socio-economic activities despite concerted efforts by the central government, civil society and the international community. The local government system in Zimbabwe is under increasing pressure from women's movements to promote women's full involvement through the institutional channels of governance that have been opened up and developed since independence in 1980 by the decentralisation process (Wipsu, 2008).

This research argues that while participation is contingent upon representation, it would be a mistake to see representation as an end in itself. It is tempting to assume that better representation of women will guarantee higher participation. Representation and participation are two

distinct phenomena which are often used interchangeably when examining women in political decision-making situations (Morna and Tolmay, 2010). Representation focuses merely on the number of women in decision-making positions and is therefore only part of the story. Participation looks at what women do when they get into these decision-making positions (Mtintso, 1999). The focus of participation is on whether women are able to participate fully and influence decisions that are made. Political participation is viewed through actions such as membership in a political party, standing for election, holding office, debating issues, and lobbying. These activities presuppose public roles and visibility. They also assume basic levels of confidence, skills and resources (Greenberg and Okani, 2001). In Zimbabwe there has been a call by the women's movement and women from various political parties to reserve a quota for women from the ward up to the presidium level (Wipsu, 2008). However, it will be argued in this study that even the legally mandated quotas and mechanisms ostensibly designed to enhance the representation of women in decision-making can easily be undermined. The increase in the numerical presence of women in representative bodies alone will not ensure their participation (Geisler, 2001).

There is a great realisation that seeking women's representation and participation on various social and public policy issues is important to enhance their confidence in governing institutions (Haque, 2003). The concept of good governance which is based on such universally accepted values as equality, accountability, transparency, efficiency, participation and responsiveness, acknowledges the contribution of both women and men in various developmental efforts and incorporate the element of gender into it (Mohan and Stokke, 2000; Kauffman and Kraay, 2007). Local governance refers to the level of government that is closest to the people. The activities of local government officials affect both women and men in ways that are fundamental to satisfying their basic needs, and therefore have a significant impact on the quality of life of members of a community (Goetz, 2003). According to the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) in *Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Governance*, local governments are in the best position to involve women in the making of decisions concerning their living conditions and to make use of their knowledge and capabilities in the promotion of sustainable development (IULA, 1998). Women continue to be significantly under-represented and play lesser local government decision-making roles than men (Cornwall and Goetz, 2005). Further aggravating the situation is the fact that women are also underrepresented in institutions and processes that inform and influence decision-making at the national level.

It is not only women's numerical representation in local government that matters, but their active participation in the sense of being able to contribute to decisions about policies and allocation of resources that is of concern. The challenge is to translate formal equality – equality in the Constitution and before the law – into substantive equality: the actual exercise of the right to equal participation. Women's mere presence in local government is not enough if that presence does not translate in actual power to make decisions about policy and items on the political agenda (Hassim, 1999). In December 2007 the UN General Assembly decided that the particular role of rural women should be highlighted by making 15th October 2008 the first International Day of Rural Women. This day was chosen since it is the day immediately before UN World Food Day. In the words of UN Resolution 62/136, this recognised "the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty." United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in his message on the international day of the rural woman in 2008, said: "Empowering rural women is crucial for ending hunger and poverty. By denying women rights and opportunities, we deny their children and societies a better future."

Women's representation and participation in politics at the local government level is a key driver for their empowerment. It is at the local government level where political parties are able to recruit their members and identify potential candidates who can later move on to contest at the national level (Panday, 2008). It is also at the local level where there is a higher probability of direct impact of women in politics because of its proximity to the community. Global evidence about women's actual presence in rural local governments and their potential impact is still very scarce (Irwin, 2009). Although information about the number of women in urban local governments and national parliaments is collected and systematised as a key indicator for assessing progress on the advancement of women's political rights, research available at the global and local level on women's presence in rural local governance is virtually non-existent (UCLG, 2004). While women's participation in politics, at both national and local government levels, is a matter of gender equality, a better understanding of how women's presence in politics helps to shape and advance gender equality is also a matter of inquiry for this research.

2. From Representation to Participation

The efforts deployed in ensuring the equitable representation for women in decision-making bodies implicitly assume that this would be an adequate mechanism to guarantee their participation in these institutions. Representation can be enhanced through legal and institutional means and such efforts have been mainly concerned with quotas and the design of electoral systems. The research argues that while participation is obviously contingent upon representation, it would be a mistake to see representation as an end in itself. It is tempting to assume that better representation will guarantee higher participation. However, the evidence clearly shows that even legally mandated quotas and mechanisms ostensibly designed to enhance the representation of women can be easily undermined by elements of the institutional design itself. The higher the

numerical presence of women in representative bodies alone cannot ensure their more effective participation in these bodies.

Effective participation cannot be legislated. It involves the creation of a political, social and cultural environment in which women acquire the awareness, information base and confidence to articulate their concerns, and an institutional environment that is receptive and responsive to such articulations. This arguably requires more committed and sustained initiatives by political parties and civil society. Such interventions need to be innovative but also sensitive to the particularity of social context, because despite the many shared attributes of patriarchy, what works in South Africa may not work in Ghana or India (Jayal, 2005). As such, while laws and institutions can create the conditions for representation, political parties and civil society – especially women's organisations and the women's movement – have an important role to play in creating the conditions for effective participation.

3. Participation

Defining and measuring political participation is by no means straightforward. Yet, how one defines political participation has important consequences for the conclusions drawn about the extent and nature of women's participation. Early studies tended to adopt narrow definitions (Childs, 2004). There is need to define genuine participation because it would be useful in distinguishing between mere mobilisation of people to implement what the government has predetermined will take place and the actual participation and decision-making by the people themselves. The concept of participation is becoming less concerned with participation in projects and programmes and beginning to focus more on participation in policy processes. Participation can be defined as taking part as an individual and as a community in decision-making in each step of the development process. As a term it is also used to refer to semi-autonomous statutory authorities who are elected by the local people and are legally responsible for the planning and implementation of specific functions.

Otzen (1999) defines participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them. Similarly, "Community, public or citizen participation is the act of allowing individual citizens within a community to take part in the formulation of policies and proposals on issues that affect the whole community" (Onibokun and Faniran, 1995: 9). More radical definitions of participation, however, not only emphasise community involvement in the processes of local development, but also demand that social development lead to empowerment of community members. This involves social change to bring about improved living conditions within a community and is especially significant to women. Therefore emphasis on participation is crucial in that the formerly disadvantaged must be the central targets. Liebenberg (1999: 6) supports the

above assertion by defining participation as "the organised efforts to increase the control over and access to resources and regulative institutions in society, on the part of individual citizens, groups, movements of those hitherto excluded from such control aimed at the socio-economic development of the whole community."

The term participation is also defined by Theron (2005: 114) as an activity "where specified groups, sharing the same interests or living in a defined geographic area, actively pursue the identification of their needs and establish mechanisms to make their choice effective." According to Theron (2005: 117), "the strong interpretation of participation equates participation with empowerment". In this case empowerment is associated with community or public self-mobilisation, decentralised decision-making, participatory role of civil society in development, and a "call for a bottom-up approach in which power is given to civil society" (Theron, 2005: 117). Participation therefore, refers to public participation as the creation or empowerment of local forums, community organisations, as well as joint planning efforts and activities involving the public. The non-existence, decline or non-empowerment of such activities implies a lack of citizen participation. Evidence of the desire as well as the actions taken for a community initiative and collective efforts are a manifestation of community participation.

Participation is a development approach which recognises the need to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in the design and implementation of policies concerning their well-being. The strengthening of women's participation in all spheres of life has become a major issue in the development discourse. Socio-economic development cannot be fully achieved without the active participation of women at the decision-making level in society (Ara, 2006). Gaventa and Valderrama (in Putu, 2006) hold the view that public participation in local government is crucial in multi-dimensional and integrated development plans. This is in line with the objective of ensuring that communities own the process of development and that the people are enabled to make a meaningful contribution to the development of their own lives. In addition, Swanepoel (in Putu, 2006) argues that community participation can be a learning process only if the people really participate. Participation does not mean that people should be brought into a project when physical labour is required. By that stage, people should already have been involved for a long time. There is no other stage for people to begin to participate than right at the start of the project. People should not only do so, but their right and ability to think, seek, discuss and make decisions should also be acknowledged.

What participation means is the functioning of the whole array of public institutions and forces which are involved in moulding the lives of the people by way of decisions and policies that impinge on their relations with one another. Participation of women in the local government bodies would include women as:

(a) Voters;

(b) Members of political parties;

(c) Candidates;

(d) Elected members of local government bodies taking part in decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation; and

(e) Members of women's organisations and their association with voluntary organisations.

In terms of process, participation appears to be an even broader concept than decision-making, because in most cases "it starts well before the decision in question is made and extends well beyond it" (Chinsinga, 2003: 139). The core issue is that participation "is not an end in itself, the aim is to create a 'virtuous circle' whereby participation in specific local initiatives leads in turn to increased levels of public interest in, and involvement with, local affairs" (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004: 57). Meyer and Cloete (in Theron, 2005: 124) explain that 'authentic public participation' normally goes through four stages, namely:

(a) The involvement of legitimate democratically elected political representatives;

(b) The involvement of leaders of legitimate organisations which represent community interests;

(c) The involvement of individual opinion leaders in the community; and

(d) The direct involvement of ordinary community members at grassroots level in massive activities. It follows therefore, that participation is highly linked to the notion of representation.

Uphoff (cited in Khan, 1993) identified four main kinds of participation, which are distinct but interrelated. These are:

(a) Participation in decision-making in identifying problems, formulating alternative planning activities, allocating resources among other issues;

(b) Participation in implementation in carrying out activities, managing and operating programmes;

(c) Participation in economic, political, social or other benefits individually or collectively; and

(d) Participation in evaluation of the activity and its outcomes for feedback purposes.

According to Nelson and Wright (1996), there is a distinction between participation as a means and participation as an end. As a means, participation is used to accomplish the aims of a project more efficiently, effectively or cheaply and as an end, it has to do with a community setting up a process to control its own development. In spite of the diversity, it implies power relations between members of a community on one hand and between them and the state and its institutions on the other hand. Thus, participation goes beyond compensatory limits if there is power shifts between people and policy-makers and resource-holding institutions.

Political Participation

Political participation can be defined as the process of any voluntary action, successful or unsuccessful, organised or unorganised, episodic or continuous, employing legitimate or illegitimate methods, and intended to influence the choice of political leaders at any level of government, local or national (Winer and Chowdhury, 1995). Spontaneous participation of all citizens in the political processes and institutions of a country is the key factor for fostering democracy. Political participation can be in formal politics or informal politics or, in the case of women, 'everyday politics' (Chowdhury, 1995).

Political participation denotes citizens' ability to negotiate with governing bodies through voting, contesting as candidates, campaigning for themselves and others' candidacy, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or collectively (Vissandjee, 2005). Exercising the right to vote alone, therefore, does not denote the fulfilment of citizenship rights and political participation is an all-inclusive concept which consists of all these above-mentioned attributes.

Local political participation is not a spontaneous social phenomenon which operates in isolation. It is "mediated by communication" and more importantly, it is through this communication that "citizens acquire information about issues and problems in the community and learn of opportunities and ways to participate" (McLeod, Scheufele and Moy, 1999: 316). In other words the issue of political parties and politicians is crucial in public participation because what one observes in local governance is that "policy makers and politicians are integrating programmes to address citizen participation." In effect "true participation is about power, and the exercise of power is politics." It therefore follows that "participation inevitably becomes simply a manifestation of a broader political process" (Mc-Leod, Scheufele and Moy, 1999: 316).

Political participation is one of the major ways to ensure women's empowerment, to increase decision-making power and enhance ability to influence matters that affect their lives in the community and in the larger society. In a broader sense, participation in politics goes far beyond electoral politics, such as voting and election to public office. Women's empowerment begins with their consciousness – perceptions about themselves, their rights, capabilities, potential and awareness of the socio-cultural, economic and political forces that affect them. Women's political empowerment and equal representation in all decision-making institutions are critical inputs in the struggle for freedom from patriarchal subjugation (Shamim and Nasreen, 2002).

Systematic integration of women augments the democratic basis, the efficiency and the quality of local government. If local government is to meet the needs of both women and men, it must build on the experiences of both women and men through an equal representation and participation at all levels and in all fields of decision-making, covering the wide range of responsibilities of local governments (Evertzen, 2001). In order to create sustainable, equal and democratic local governments where women and men have equal access to decision-making, equal access to services and equal treatment in these services, the gender perspective must be mainstreamed into all areas of policy making and management in local government.

Political participation serves as the basic argument for

local government. The liberal and radical approaches see the devolution of power to local government as 'a means of promoting a new communitarian spirit and forming the seedbed of democratic practice' (Mohan and Stoke, 1995). The democratic idea of local government implies that active participation of the citizens in local affairs is both a goal in itself and an instrument for strengthening society at large since participation allows each citizen the right to influence government decision-making in several ways. Firstly participation represents a real occasion to influence decisions about everyday life; it narrows the gap between rulers and the ruled. Second, it creates the possibility for political education. Active participation in local affairs might be perceived as the most important training ground for democracy. By participating in administration of councils, directly or indirectly, the citizens become familiar with public issues. They become more sensitive to the need for setting priorities and for reaching compromises between different legitimate interests. Third, there is an assumption in this argument of a connection between local participation and the feeling of solidarity in community. Citizen participation is viewed as revitalising democratic practice in general by giving opportunities for local self-government to the average citizen (Stollman, 1979).

Many political theorists have laid importance on the issue of women's participation in politics. Mill (1993) pointed out that the participation of both the minority and the majority will have to be ensured for a government to be competent and efficient. He included women in his definition of the enormously disenfranchised 'minority' at that time. In *On Liberty,* he discussed ways to represent and articulate competing interests and emphasised the importance of tolerating different views from different quarters. In *Considerations on Representative Government,* Mill (1993) advocated bringing intellectual and social diversity into government by extending the franchise to women. In the past, it was widely held that women were less political than men, if not apolitical. It was assumed that women had lower levels of interest in politics and lower levels of participation in political activities. And when women did vote, the classic, albeit minimal measure of political participation, it was claimed that they did so on the basis of emotion rather than reason, on the basis of a candidate's personality rather than on policies or in the same way as their husbands. Feminist political science offers a two-pronged critique of such approaches to women's political participation and voting behaviour. First it challenges the mainstream conceptualisation of politics, with its tendency to exclude or discount forms of participation that fall beyond the boundaries of a narrow definition of what constitutes 'politics' (Childs, 2005).

Adopting a wider conception of political participation, recent studies have revealed that women and men's political activism gap is dramatically reduced, and with women more active than men according to some measures (Norris, 1996). Feminists also charge the mainstream with failing to fully consider how gendered life experiences might influence and constrain the extent, and nature, of women's political activity. Second, feminist political science asks why the rigorous research designs employed in the academic study of political participation and voting were not applied to the study of sex, gender and political participation. Why for example was it acceptable to make statements about women's political interests and motivations in the absence of supporting evidence? With an increasing recognition among international community of women's historic exclusion from structures of power, a global commitment has been made to redress gender imbalance in politics. Women's enhanced participation in governance structures is viewed as the key to redress gender inequalities in societies (Farzana, 2005).

4. Arguments for Women's Political Representation and Participation

The issue of women's political representation and participation merits discussion from the perspective of Women in Development (WID). In Boserup (1970), the position of women in developmental efforts is critically discussed. She was the first to argue that the modern sector is dominated by men, while women remained in the 'traditional' or 'subsistence' sectors. She further argued that the low participation of women in the 'modern economic sectors' was bad for both development and women themselves. Women should be integrated into the decision-making processes to bring improvements to their status and for them to enjoy the fruits of development initiatives. There are broad-spectrum arguments for increasing women's political representation and participation. The commonly theoretical claims regard the move as stemming from the recognition of women's need to have an influence in decision-making positions. Women are considered as effective change agents at the local level because of their strong views and invaluable suggestions in local processes which derive from their intimate knowledge of local and neighbourhood problems (Beal, 1997). Their political presence is crucial for ensuring that their interests, needs and concerns are incorporated in the policy process by their own input. Several scholars have argued that women can play a significant role in local politics due to their special interests in local government. Phillips (1996) specifically describes the affinity between women and local government as follows:

(a) Division of functions between central and local government in which the functions delegated to the locality have come to overlap remarkably with traditional areas of female concern; and

(b) An additional correlation between women and community action which suggests that local politics is more open to women as activists as well as to women as elected representatives. Moreover, local government elected offices are perceived as more accessible to women because of their locality and part-time nature (Phillips, 1996; Pringle and Watson, 1998). On the other hand, the British Conservative

Party's handbook indicated that "women are extremely well equipped for local government. They have a vested interest in, and immediate knowledge of, the schools, services, housing, child care and the environment, which are the responsibilities of local government" (quoted in Phillips, 1998: 112).

Other scholars have justified the desirability of women's representation and participation in democratic institutions in general and in local governance in particular (Gaidzanwa, 2004; Jayal, 2005; Wipsu, 2008). However, not all those who have endorsed the objective of enhancing women's participation have also endorsed the arguments that justify this objective. It has been argued for example that the criteria for eligibility in politics at the local government level are less stringent and even that local politics provide a suitable space for political apprenticeship (Evertzen, 2001). Such arguments are, however, patronising about women, and unabashedly cast doubts on their political competence.

Opare (2005) argues that the ability of any group of people or their chosen representatives to participate in decisions affecting their lives not only puts them in a position to contribute ideas but also provides them with the tools and options for reshaping the course, direction, and outcome of specific programmes and activities which will determine their future. It is therefore critical to engage women in decision-making processes within the communities where they reside and obtain their livelihoods.

Chowdhury (1994), points out a number of considerations underlying the cause for women's representation and participation in local governance. These factors are as follows:

(a) It will improve the efficiency and efficacy of local government and therefore render local government more accountable;

(b) It deepens democracy and equality as it will reinforce representative democratic institutions with participatory forms. The demand for proportional representation of women in politics is therefore unavoidable;

(c) Women are well informed and experienced about their basic problems and needs. However, they will be deprived of an equal share if they are not properly represented in the political process;

(d) Increased participation in politics and decision-making bodies will facilitate greater development and open up more spaces for them; and

(e) For the efficient and maximum utilisation of human resources, an increased number of women should be allowed to participate in politics.

Other assertions often encountered are that local politics is about issues that concern women's daily lives such as water, waste disposal, health and other social services. This implies that participation in local government is an extension of women's involvement in the civic issues facing their communities (Jayal, 2005). Other scholars also suggest that it is easier for women given their household constraints and childcare responsibilities, to participate in public life at a level more proximate to them (Evertzen, 2001). Such assertions may imply that national-level politics is about issues more distant from and perhaps incomprehensible to women. However, practical concerns are undoubtedly important as such arguments seem to convey the ideological flavour of patriarchy.

4.1. Intrinsic Argument

The intrinsic argument looks at equal participation of women in politics from the democratic and human rights perspective (Jayal, 2005). It contends that women constitute 52% of the world's population and therefore it is only rational that they should participate equally in local governance with men (Farzana, 2005). Their contribution to the social and economic development of society is also more than half as compared with that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal political structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant. Women will feel truly represented and recognised in the democratic process if only more women are elected. Therefore, it is only fair that women should have at least an equal say in the use and distribution of national resources. Politics is an arena where such decisions are taken. It also argues that a society where women are not represented equally is undemocratic and unjust (Morna and Tolmay, 2010).

It is important that women participate equally in formal political structures in their countries. This is a simple justice argument that contends that no country can claim itself truly democratic if half of its female population is not represented in its political institutions (Sawer, 2002; Paxton and Hughes, 2007). Only by having more locally elected women in politics, women will feel truly represented and recognised in the democratic process. A society where women are not part of the political system is an unjust society. Phillips (1991) also supports the justice argument by indicating that, "just as it is unjust that women should be cooks and not engineers, so it is unjust that they should be excluded from the central activities in the political realm." However, the case for justice "says nothing about what women will do if they get into politics" (1991: 62).

In *The Subjugation of Women* (Reynolds, 1999: 547-8), Mill (1993) stated that the idea of denying suffrage to half of the population and thus losing their talents in society was 'non-utilitarian idiocy.' Rule and Zimmerman (1997) argue that a parliament would fail to recognise or comprehend issues of great importance to women in society if there were few women members, an observation which raises broader questions of answerability, openness, and isolation. The European Network of Experts (1997: 8) observed that:

"A balanced representation of women and men at all levels of decision-making, guarantees better government. Because of their history as a group, women have their own and unique perspective. They have different values and ideas and behave differently. Increased participation of

women in decision-making will create a new culture and shed new light on how power should be exercised. Women attach great importance to the quality of contact between people and are less individualistic than men. The validity and trustworthiness of democracy will be in question if women continue to be absent from different institutions of society."

On the other hand, Lister (1997) points out that policy institutions and processes must be represented by women because their interests differ from those of men. Accordingly, women cannot articulate their definite views in the decision-making process through indirect representation alone. That is why their perspective must be articulated directly in political debates and in the decision-making process in order to ensure true development. To ensure justice in a society, it is crucial for women to take part in the political system.

4.2. Instrumentalist Argument

The instrumentalist argument defines a political normality from the attitudes of conventional politics. This argument pushes for women's greater political participation by using two different types of arguments: the utility and symbolic arguments. The utility argument is based on the notion that women have different interests and different political priorities. Women across the world have shared experiences that male-dominated decision-making bodies do not serve the interests of women adequately. Phillips (1995) in *The Politics of Presence* builds the case for women's participation. She asserts that, "there are particular needs, interests and concerns that arise from women's experiences and these will be inadequately addressed in a politics that is dominated by men. Equal rights to vote have not proved strong enough to deal with this problem. There must also be equality amongst those elected to office" (Phillips, 1995: 66). Many empirical studies conducted in various social and political contexts uphold the theory of the politics of the presence (Wangnerud, 2000; Young, 2000).

4.3. Essentialist and Diversity Arguments

Others used an essentialist or diversity argument that men and women are different and as a result have different needs, expectations, views and priorities. Beal (1996: 3) asserts this by indicating that "socially conferred roles and responsibilities differentially determine how women and men contribute to city life". In general, women and men perform different tasks and live in different economic and social conditions. Therefore, they have different political interests. Women have a different vision and conception of politics owing to their gender conditions as mothers, wives and care givers. Therefore, it is expected that women's inclusion in politics will bring a special caring focus and humane values to mainstream politics. Also it is assumed that the diversity of life experiences of women in politics will improve the quality of governance.

Having the major responsibility for reproductive activities, women have a particular interest in the allocation of local resources and services such as water, fuel, sanitation, housing, public safety and health services. Male politicians normally do not automatically represent women's interests. Women's active participation in decision-making is essential in order to ensure that women can promote and defend their specific needs and interests. They can be prime actors in promoting gender-sensitive governance that addresses the interests of both women and men and enhances access to and control over resources for both (Rao, 1998; Burns and Verba, 2001).

In some countries, such as Lesotho and Namibia, women have succeeded in changing the political agenda by putting women's issues such as social services, child care, reproductive rights and violence against them on it. A survey of women's political experience carried out by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 1999, including 187 women from 65 countries, shows that 89% of women politicians consider that they have a special responsibility to represent the needs and interests of women (IPU, 2000). Besides, neither men nor women form a homogeneous category. There is diversity within these categories as well, which has to be taken into account when a democratic local process is to be achieved. This argument holds that women's participation in decision-making, especially at the local government level, is crucial in order to ensure that the needs, interests and priorities of both women and men will be taken into account in the development and implementation of policies and programmes at the local level (Morna and Tolmay, 2010).

4.4. Transformative Arguments

Women have also been seen as transformative leaders in politics. There is a growing recognition of the impact that women have on political institutions and agendas. Their different approaches to governance have been defined as a version of transformative leadership, a framework within which power is used to create change and develop people and communities. This type of leadership is non-hierarchical and participatory, and it gives priority to disadvantaged sectors of the society. Their style of leadership is said to be more inclusive, collaborative and consultative, more people oriented and is based on leadership by example, focusing on the issues rather than personalities (Morna and Tolmay, 2010).

4.5. Symbolic Arguments

The symbolic argument stresses the cultural impact of women's presence in public life. It holds that women in politics create role models that not only raise the status of women in society but also provide space and motivation to other women to aspire to be in politics (Sawer, 2006). Women who participate politically and lead public lives have, in some countries, managed to impact on the way that women in general can and should be referred to. This can be done by becoming involved in areas which were traditionally seen as 'men's affairs,' or 'hard politics', as well as insisting on redefining and prioritising 'soft issues' such as welfare, maternity leave and politics (Evertzen, 2001).

4.6. Incorruptibility

More women in politics can change the political system. Research into corruption shows that women are less likely than men to behave opportunistically, thus bringing more women into government may have significant benefits for society in general. For instance the World Bank in its policy statement on gender equality, *Engendering Development,* asserts a strong relationship between relatively high levels of government corruption and male-dominated politics. The report concludes that this finding lends 'additional support for having more women in politics and in the labour force – since they could be an effective force for good government and business trust' (World Bank, 2001: 96).

The Indian local government councils (*panchayats*) headed by women have fewer incidences of bribery than those headed by men. Research in Rwanda confirms that women are perceived to be less corrupt, particularly at the local level. These findings suggest that women could reduce corruption and increased faith in government (World Bank, 2001). Thus the challenge of increasing numbers of women in public life, long defended by feminists as a matter of human rights and democratic justice, can now be seen to have an efficiency payoff – more women in power may have the effect of reducing corruption. Goetz (2003) argues that if women do exhibit preferences for less corrupt behaviour, that may simply be because they have been excluded from opportunities for such behaviour, and that effect is bound to change over time as greater numbers of women enter public office.

The idea of linking notions of womanly virtue with incorruptibility is not, of course new. It is based upon essentialist notions of women's higher moral nature and their propensity to bring their finer moral sensibilities to bear on public life, and particularly on the conduct of politics – an argument which saw considerable use by suffragettes. Ironically this argument stands in direct contradiction with another essentialist notion that has for so long denied women direct access to politics – notions articulated by philosophers from Plato to Rousseau about women's "inherent incapacity for abstract thought", and their unfitness to govern because of their inability to grasp basic notions of justice and ethical reasoning (Okin, 1979 and Lloyd, 1984). In Rousseau's conception, for instance, this unfitness comes from their 'natural' role as caretakers and custodians of affectivity, desire, and the body in the home. They argue that if appeals to personal connections and desires were allowed to move public debates, the principles of universality, impartiality, and justice would be subverted, as too would the convenient separation between the private and the public realms (Schwartz, 1984).

Arguments based upon fairness, however, are less persuasive to policymakers than instrumentalist ones that imply that the conduct and substance of politics will change. There is need to combine the justice argument with either the expectation that women can transform politics, or with the insistence that women are needed to represent women's interests. There is evidence from different countries that women in politics do focus more than men on passing legislation and implementing policies in areas benefiting women, such as child support programmes, prevention of violence against women, and the achievement of gender equity in education (Rule and Zimmerman, 1997). The same also applies to countries in which changes to electoral rules or the reservation of local and national government seats has brought more women into politics. Uganda and South Africa, both with more than a quarter of their legislatures female, have seen the revision of laws on rape, domestic violence and domestic relations (Goetz, 2003). In Indian local government, where one third of seats are reserved for women, has seen local spending patterns being more responsive to poor women's concerns in spite of the formidable obstacles women councillors face from hostile male colleagues and government employees.

4.7. Equality Arguments

A more convincing argument for representation and participation of women in local governance is rooted in the conviction that unless all sections of society, whether women, racial or religious minorities and other disadvantaged groups are represented in legislative bodies, their interests will not be articulated and therefore will suffer from policy neglect (Chowdhury, 1994; Panday, 2008). Democratic history and practice clearly demonstrate that even democratic institutions, based as they are on the principle of one-person-one vote, are blind to cultural and gender differences. Therefore, they do not spontaneously provide any guarantee for effective representation of women's interests, or indeed those of other marginalised or excluded groups (Jayal, 2005). For there to be tangible policy outcomes that take into account the special needs and interests of women, there is need for effective representation, which in turn may involve making a case for special arrangements, such as quotas for women's participation. It is because of these imperfections in the way in which representative institutions actually work, that the case has been made for replacing the 'politics of ideas', rooted in the context of rival political visions, by the 'politics of presence' effectuated through safeguarded quotas (Phillips, 1995; Jayal, 2005).

Without including women, who constitute nearly 52% of the world's population, in the process of governance, countries cannot reach their full human potential (IPU, 2007; Kamal, 2000). Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, reaffirmed his belief in gender equity in terms of human development and empowerment and argues: "It is impossible to realise our goals while discriminating against half the human race" (Annan, 2006 quoted in DFID, 2007:1). Thus, the greater representation and participation of women in local governance is due not only to the democratisation, liberalisation and modernisation processes around the world, but it is rather a matter of human development for eradication of poverty and sustainable governance (Jabeen and Iqbal, 2010). The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their social,

economic and political status are essential factors in the achievement both of transparent and accountable government and administration, as well as the attainment of sustainable development. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making provides a balance which more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning (Kanjaye, 1999).

5. Implications for Local Governance

The exclusion of women from decision-making bodies has very negative consequences for development. Development practitioners understand the importance of target group involvement in the design of programmes and policies if they are to succeed. Representation and participation enable people to identify with and own policies and other decision-making instruments and practices, especially since participation is a learning process (Jabeen and Jadoon, 2008). These factors mean that for any government programme or policy that depends on the input of women to succeed, women's representation and participation in the appropriate public debates and the consequent decisions must be sought and assured. The representation and participation of women in decision-making bodies is an assurance that their issues will be dealt with better by both women's sex and gender roles. Men often misunderstand or marginalise the gender-based needs of their communities (Mashingaidze, 2000).

6. Conclusion

There are a number of research studies that support different rationales or theoretical approaches to women's inclusion in politics. Despite the differences of the theoretical base of the need for women's political representation and participation, the broad agreement that proponents of the varied approaches have arrived at is that women must be included in politics. Feminist political science maintains that gender is central to understanding conventional politics and in addressing the question of "who governs." Too many questions about women's participation and representation in politics are yet to be answered fully (Mackay, 2004). Women's political representation and participation in decision-making are two different issues. Participation is a necessary but insufficient condition for representation because representation does not flow automatically from participation. Women all over the world have participated widely in political movements in times of crisis, but once the crisis is over, they are relegated to the domestic arena (Nelson and Chowdhury, 1994). Much of the research and literature on women as elected representatives focuses on women at national and/or state level, often as leaders (Swers, 1998; Carrol, 2001; Paxton and Hughes, 2007).

It is in recognition of the vital contribution of people to decisions affecting their lives that the establishment of local government in Zimbabwe is seen as a way of encouraging maximum participation of all citizens in the affairs of government in an open democratic state that guarantees civil and political liberties essential for popular mobilisation and civic engagements (Dorgbedo, 2003). The local government system therefore should therefore be the easiest way of enhancing women's participation in decision-making, but in reality decentralisation of power to local government has not led to increases in women's representation at the local level as envisaged.

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