November 2005

Empowerment Beyond Numbers: Substantiating Women's Political Participation

Bilkis Vissandjee

Alisha Apale

Saskia Wieringa

Shelly Abdool

Sophie Dupéré

Empowerment Beyond Numbers:
Substantiating Women's Political Participation

By Bilkis Vissandjee, Ph.D.[1], Alisha Apale, B.A[2], Saskia Wieringa, Ph.D.[3], Shelly Abdool, M.A.[4] Sophie Dupéré, M.Sc.(Ph.D. Candidate)[5]

Abstract[6]

From our households and into our communities, from independent States to international governing bodies, gender operates as a construct of evolving aspects of women's identities and is a medium through which expectations are prescribed, social norms are formed and power relations are negotiated. Gender constructs that impede women's access to the public spheres of society diminish the possibility for equitable and empowering life conditions. Of particular emphasis in this paper, facilitating women's entry into political bodies across the world is also compromised by persistent obstacles in women's opportunities in both political and private spheres of life.

Our research engages female and male panchayat members in rural Gujarat, India. We aim to understand how being a woman affects access to political office, experiences therein, negotiation procedures and decisions taken. It is theorized that facilitating female representation in local governmental structures (a panchayat) through a quota represents one of many routes toward empowerment and one potential means of improving health and household welfare. When empowerment is analyzed within India's panchayat quota, dimensions such as gender and corresponding perceptions, norms and conditions evidence the centrality of gender as a persistent fault-line in number-based initiatives. The panchayat thus mirrors gendered social realities, demonstrating how complex the processes of substantial democratic political participation and women's empowerment are, in India and elsewhere.

Keywords: rural India, empowerment, political participation

1 Professeure agrégée – Professor; Faculté des sciences infirmières - School of Nursing; Université de Montréal - University of Montreal; CP 6128 - succursale Centre-Ville - PO Box 6128; Montréal, Québec H3C 3J7 Canada; Tel: (514) 343 6837 - Fax: (514) 343 2306; bilkis.vissandjee@umontreal.ca

2 Research Associate, Faculté des sciences infirmières - School of Nursing; Université de Montréal - University of Montreal; CP 6128 - succursale Centre-Ville - PO Box 6128; Montréal, Québec H3C 3J7 - Canada; alisha.nicole@gmail.com

3 Director IIAV, International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement; Affiliated Senior Research Scholar; Amsterdam School for Social Research; University of Amsterdam; Obiplein 4, 1094 RB Amsterdam, tel 31-20-6651318

4 Gender and Women's Health Department; World Health Organization 20, ave Appia 1211 Geneva 27 Switzerland, Phone: + 41 22 791 1611, abdools@who.int

5Department of Social Sciences and Preventive Medicine, Laval University, Québec, Sophie.Dupere@fsi.ulaval.ca

Introduction

The partnering of terms such as empowerment and democratization currently abound in an international discourse geared towards a "freer-world" (Sen, 2005; Hampson, 2004; Al-Tuwaijri, 2004; Grown et al, 2003; Malhotra, 2003; Uphoff, 2003). The outcomes and conditions implied in these terms and processes are meaningful and regularly surface in gender discourse as well. From households and into communities, from independent States to international governing bodies, gender operates as a continually evolving aspect of women's identities and is a medium through which expectations are prescribed, social norms are formed and power relations are negotiated. Gender--the social norms, perceptions and meanings associated with being a woman or a man--likewise operate as a salient dimension in one's political involvement.

In this paper we explore women's experiences of democratic political participation; our goal is to consider how women's political participation, through the support of a quota system, operates as a tool for women's empowerment in rural Gujarat. Using qualitative methodology, we present the experiences of women in rural Gujarat, India, who, through the support of reservations, now participate in block (Gram Panchayat) or intermediary level (Taluka) government offices. Their experiences are presented alongside those of their male colleagues. The phrase, women's political participation refers to three particular dimensions of political activity as discussed in participant discourse and presented in our results. They include the decision to pursue council positions, election processes, and the decision-making contributions made by women in public office. Positioning terms such as democracy and empowerment within the contexts and conditions of women's lives in rural Gujarat makes visible the challenges and tensions that lie between concepts and lived experience. Our results evidence the need for further discussion on the expectations held in women's empowerment initiatives, particularly as directed and gauged by number-based strategies within the international development practices and State-level constitutional strategies. While the presence of women in the panchayat may symbolize an important benchmark in initiatives towards women's empowerment via political participation, it seems that gender remains a significant fault-line determining women's substantial political participation. Without addressing how gender constructs mediate women's access to public spheres of society, our understanding of political participation as a means towards empowerment, as supported through the 1993 panchayat quota, may remain conceptually attractive, yet functionally limited.

What is democracy?

A derivative of two Greek words "demos" (the people) and "kratos" (to have strength or to rule), democracy refers to a governing system characterized by a civil-political relationship wherein elected representatives are responsible to the numeric majority (Spero & Hart, 1999). Commonly known as rule by the people, (McLean, 1996) or government by discussion (Sen, 2005), democracy denotes citizens' ability to negotiate with governing bodies through voting, candidacy, campaigning, occupying political office and/or lobbying individually or collectively. In application, however, democracies throughout the world take on a variety of forms and depend upon several key, yet negotiable, preconditions. These preconditions include the mobilization and social interaction of constituents, the dissemination of accessible, transparent and

politically uncensored information, access to resources for the cultivation of autonomous decision-making and the promotion of rights, agency and equity that is documented at the constitutional level and embodied throughout civil society (Ahern, Nuti & Masterson, 2000; Arora, 1999; Gleason, 2001, Vissandjée et al., 2005). In sum, the degree to which governments engage its citizenry and (ideally) extend voice, agency and political participation to all constituents influences where, when, how, for whom and to what degree political empowerment may exist.

What is empowerment?

As noted by many activists and academics, the term empowerment is now a ubiquitous buzz word exchanged liberally within development discourse and among politicians, health professionals, educators, social workers, managers and labour organizations, not to mention marginalized groups. It is appropriated and employed with ease, implying that merely uttering the term may produce a groundswell toward empowerment (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994; Wieringa, 2003). In fact, references to empowerment abound to such an extent that one could contend that virtually all 6.4 billion of us are en-route to empowerment.

As put forth by Wieringa (1994), empowerment-speak refers to a broad range of conceptualizations. It is dispersed and applied through numerous ideologies, movements and technologies across the globe, responding to continually evolving meanings, interpretations, strategies and stakeholders. The fact that a centralized definition is absent from the discourse is partially a reflection of these diversities; it also speaks to the salient nature of empowerment to a wide variety of issues. Approaches to women's empowerment alternately posit powerlessness as an issue of economic disadvantage (Elson, 1999), of material impoverishment (Moser, 1993), as an issue of access to education (Gleason, 2001) or health care (Wallerstein, 1994), etc. The conditions apparent in disempowering situations may be framed within a human rights discourse (Sen et al., 1994), as an outcome of structural violences (Farmer, 2003) or as a question of human security deficits (Hampson, 2004).

Although the 20th century has witnessed multiple inroads towards the alleviation of gender disparities in these areas, being a woman is often – and appropriately – noted as a persistent liability in empowerment discourse. Moreover, in spite of all the achievements esteemed to alleviate gender disparities in the 20th century, the number of women occupying positions of influence in the political realm, (estimated at only 16% of parliamentary seats globally), has seen very little substantive change (Chen et al., 2005; Wieringa, 1994). As advocated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the persistence of gender-based inequities and poor representation of women in governing bodies are situations that do not exist independent of each other (Grown et al., 2005).Issues such as access to education, income and health care – some of the basic building-blocks of social infrastructure – are the very issues daily hashed over and determined by local, national and international governing bodies and interests across the world (Lock, 1998). Regardless of how approaches to empowerment are framed, it is paramount that the political dimensions of these initiatives are acknowledged, particularly as governments impact the way that resources, opportunities, responsibilities and rights are distributed, accessed and reinforced. As such, it would seem that initiatives which focus on increasing women's substantive political participation would offer a more resolute means of empowering women across a wide variety of domains.

Women in the Panchayati Raj

Like many countries, India maintains a national democratic constitution, boasting inclusive and equitable access to political participation. At the same time, the sheer size and demographic breakdown of India begets significant challenges in political organizing, resulting in a civil code that is varied by region and strongly shaped by religious and cultural distinctions. In order to close the gaps between national and local governance, local political participation has been facilitated via the 1992 Panchayati Raj system. Particularly attentive to social organizing and development in rural India, panchayats are one means of decentralizing national governance. A form of grassroots democracy intended to bridge national and local interests and needs, the Panchayati Raj is a means of leveling the playing field for democratic political participation (Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999; World Bank, 2003).

In support of decentralization and in order to facilitate Indian women's entry into the political sphere, in 1993 a thirty percent reservation for women was introduced in the panchayat system (Arora, 1999; Kanango, 1996). It was expected that facilitating women's admission to one-third of positions in governing bodies would enable women to reach a critical threshold in the pursuit of changes in gender equity and thus, women's empowerment (UNIFEM, 2003). However, along with other marginalized citizens, the entry of Indian women into the realm of politics does not go unchallenged. The under-representation of women in politics is both descriptive (i.e., the number of women in political institutions is not reflective of the number of women in society) and substantive (i.e., the unique perspectives of women must be heard in political institutions to ensure that women's needs, demands and interests are incorporated into political agendas) (Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000). When the reservation system was implemented, political parties were not necessarily inclined to support female candidates and the chances of being elected while not being a party member, or related to one, were slim. Moreover, the gap between constitutionally-instituted rights and the conditions which enable women to recognize and embrace those rights often remains fragmented by the absence of politically-reinforced responses to women's daily needs and interests.

Without a more substantive conceptualization of female-male relations, both inside and outside of the public domain, filling quota prescriptions risks contributing to routes of women's empowerment with outcomes observed by Nussbaum (2003) wherein we see the emergence of a new social underclass. Similarly Banerjee (2003), Reid (2003), Jacquette (1997) and Lama (2001) document strategies for women's empowerment which have necessitated the erasure of "femininity" within politics, the persistence of proxy-ruling and populist elections, and the regard for female leaders as goddesses imbued with a particular religious authority or vision. Moreover, the application of a gender lens to world politics reveals that today, when women do occupy political offices, they are often assigned to ministries dealing with the perceived "soft" issues of politics such as health and education, both of which are often shrouded under the "hard" political areas of defence, finance and international trade, all of which are currently dominated by men (Peterson & Runyan, 1993). The masculinization of certain domains in politics is frequently blamed for the marginalization of issues (such as comprehensive health care and education) which, when absent, are most apt to present women with destabilizing life conditions (Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000). While the strength and determination of women's movements in India remains strong, the devolution of substantial political leverage is a complex and long process (Chaudhuri & Heller, 2002). This is likewise experienced by some women in rural Gujarat.

II. METHODS
Study Design

The data subset explored in this paper, namely women's political participation in rural Gujarat, is derived from a broader, multi-dimensional research project, *Social, Economic and Political Autonomy, Women's Health: Will This Road to Women's Empowerment Contribute to Household Welfare?* With respect to women's political autonomy, a unique yet interrelated dimension of the broader project, it is theorized that female representation in local government structures represents one of many routes towards empowerment. Developed within the context of the CIDA-Shastri Partnership Programme[7] - between the Faculty of Nursing, the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, University of Montreal, Canada[8] and the Aga Khan Health Services, India (AKHS, I) (1998-2000), this data subset was gathered through a collaborative, participatory and international effort involving a range of Gujarati and Canadian stakeholders, including women and men, community workers and local decision-makers. Our investigation, guided by a gender-sensitive methodology, engages female and male panchayat members in rural Gujarat, with the aim of understanding how being a woman affects access to office, experiences therein, negotiation procedures and decisions taken in public office.

Sample Selection

The sample is taken from villages in the rural Junagadh district of Gujarat, India, within the Gujarat Health System Development Project (GHSDP), serviced by the AKHS, I. As detailed in Table one, eight members (four panchayat and four Sarpanch) of the local Gram Panchayat government were identified by community contact persons as potential participants, according to their implication in political activities. Five Taluka officers were also interviewed. Both female and male participants were selected in order to determine gender differentials in elections, position, duty, and decision-making power. Extremes were sought in order to conduct appropriate comparisons in terms of someone actively or passively involved in their political duties.

Interview Guides

Research instruments were drafted in English via e-mail exchanges between the Indian and Canadian teams. Canadian team members worked on-site with the Indian team for the semantic and conceptual translation of proposed questions. Meetings for the development and translation of interview questions included Canadian and Indian research team members, community-based members of AKHS,I and village representatives. Among these people, the focus group moderator and interviewers were also present which helped to ensure mutual understandings of concepts and translations as well as cultural congruence, an aspect of utmost importance in intercultural research (Basu, 1990; Evans, 1992; Vissandjée et al., 2000 & 2002). A pre-test and debriefing

7 The Partnership Programme and the CIDA-SICI (CSP) project aims to expand and strengthen institutional and individual co-operation between India and Canada by promoting practical, mutually beneficial links between Indian and Canadian universities. For further information, refer to the SICI website: http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~sici/

8 For more information about the project, please the visit the website hosted by the University of Montreal. http://www.scinf.umontreal.ca/womenindia/

session was held with all members of the data collection team and was used to guide the revision and formulation of culturally appropriate interview guides (see Table two).

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were translated and back-translated from Gujarati to English to ensure validation and were coded by two team members for more refined code definitions through the processes of interaction and discussion (Gilmer, J.S. et al., 1995; Huberman & Miles, 1991). Content analysis was performed with the assistance of Nud*ist software (Richards & Richards, 1997), categorizing participant discourse into thematic codes on political participation, according to the dimensions of our objectives, with free codes assigned to emerging categories that allowed for additional insights into participants perspectives. Matrices were constructed to distinguish between female and male discourse in order to tease out differing perceptions and experiences as well as shared viewpoints. Data was validated via e-mail with local community members in the Gujarat AKHS, India office, and both Indian and Canadian team members participated in the interpretation of results during a visit to Canada by members of the Indian team.

III. RESULTS

Selections of participant discourse are presented according to three aspects of political participation, namely, the decision to pursue council decisions, election processes and the decision-making contributions made by women in public office. In doing so, the strength of mediating factors, such as family dynamics, age, education, etc is demonstrated, particularly as female participants tend to center their responses around these issues. By describing both female and male experiences as panchayat members (PMs), our results illustrate the salience of gender constructs with respect to women's political participation.

Why Hold Public Office?

In 1993, India set a mandate to fulfill a 30 percent reservation system. Five years later, through the 1998-2000 CIDA-Shastri and AKHS, I initiative, female and male PMs were interviewed. When asked about their motivation to pursue public office, female PMs replied as follows:

Our constitution has given us rights isn't it?

For us [women] it all depends on the thinking of people in the house.

If the family is involved in politics, she will be more interested in politics and will have more exposure to it …good upbringing … every woman has courage, strength and determination but she needs support, someone to encourage her.

It is because of their heredity, such as Indira Ghandi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru. From their very childhood they know about politics and like that they are in politics … [Indira Ghandi] was a woman like us, but because she was educated and had good luck, she progressed.

Based on participants' comments, the household seems to be a strong mediating factor in

a woman's decision to pursue public office. For these women it seems that the family is regarded as a source of support facilitating their political participation, particularly by enabling women to acquire the tools to do so, such as an education.

When male panchayat members were asked about their motivation to pursue public office, representative responses include a long-time interest in politics or an interest in doing good for the village. In the words of one male Sarpanch,

> I witnessed harassment and [the] hardship of others [due to the attitudes of panchayat members towards poor people] in the past and decided to become involved in politics to oppose [these] 'bad' forces.

While our sample is not exhaustive, it would appear that when women and men are asked why one would pursue political office women's responses more consistently reflect the mediating factors in place of their actual ambitions and interests. The household environment, for example, appears to operate as a mediating factor in women's participation in political office. Alternatively, men refer neither to household dynamics nor to their female relations with respect to their decision. Rather, their responses are clear and direct and it appears as if their choice to become involved in local government is primarily rooted in personal conviction.

Electing Leaders

When asked to describe her nomination, one female Sarpanch (the head of the Panchayat) responds by saying:

> The village made me; earlier my husband was Sarpanch and he did good work for the village. I do not understand anything. I just gave my signature…there was no election.

A second female PM was asked why she was elected over other candidates. She responded by saying:

> I was elected with two reasons. One, people trusted me and they respect me for my profession. I am a trained midwife. So they thought that I will be able to do good work. The people in our village believe that as my nephew is a MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) he will help us get our work done. They think that I'll go to MLA and make presentation and persuade him.

In a women's focus group discussion, participants were asked to reflect upon the professional or personal qualities that would facilitate one's election. Referring to the qualities of a current female Sarpanch, one woman explained:

> She is intelligent. It is because of her personality and her way of respectfully sitting in the company of elders and giving bold/confident answers …She is a daughter of this place. So it alright for her to be moving around because she is like everybody's daughter. There is no shame in going anywhere.

When male PMs were asked to describe their nomination experiences, one participant replied as follows:

> Q: You became [a Sarpanch] by winning an election … the village people have made you?
>
> A: Elected my majority.
>
> Q. There were many people in the village. Why did only you become the sarpanch? You only got more votes?
>
> A. The people of village thought it proper. They found in me a suitable candidate and gave their votes in my favour.

Based upon participant responses, it seems that when election processes are described just as with the responses regarding the pursuit of office, the reasons enumerated by women regarding their candidacy also seem to focus heavily on mediating factors. In particular, being related to a well-regarded male PM seems to influence a woman's election. It seems that a woman's family status (as a daughter versus daughter-in-law) and thus her mobility within her home village also facilitates her election. Male participants, however, cite the rather objective fact of a majority election; the favour of voters was achieved because the villagers "thought it proper". No reference was made to one's family relations.

(Re)Negotiating Leverage

As a third dimension to our inquiry on how women's political participation operates as a tool towards empowerment, female and male PMs were questioned on how council decisions were negotiated and concluded.

Male council members consistently explain that as determined by the democratic system, decisions are made through majority consent. Female Sarpanch, however, do not seem to have the same perspective on how decision-making is conducted, negotiated and concluded. When asked about how council decisions are made, three female PMs respond as follows:

> I am illiterate. I do as my nephew [an MLA] says, and the work is successful.
>
> I don't know anything. I just do signature and he [husband – former Sarpanch] does everything. No one comes to me; I do signature. I never go to Panchayat office. He goes.
>
> I do not have any decision-making powers; I am not trained. I understand decisions, but I do not make decisions.

Among this group of participants, it seems that being a woman alters the negotiation and decision-making contributions one may have. More specifically, it seems that aside from providing signatures (all panchayat members must sign agreements before proceeding with any activities), the contributions of female PMs may be significantly limited.

According to participants, women's contributions are limited due to illiteracy, persistent absence from panchayat meetings and a general lack of decision-making training and thus "powers". Moreover, women's limited participation appears to be compensated by the contributions of their male relatives.

When male PMs were asked to reflect upon the roles of female PMs - in terms of women's opportunities for positions in public office as well as women's decision-making contributions, they respond as follows:

> They [the government] enacted 30% reservation for women. If a woman is Sarpanch, the actual work is done by her husband only because that much awareness is not there yet.

> Women must have courage in them; in order to have courage, to develop courage, women have to educate themselves.

> When you are the chief, you need not take permission from anyone; this may be a problem for women in our culture.

> It is necessary to give them [women] training and knowledge…so that they can know what is going on in the country and outside.

According to their responses, it seems that male PMs are well aware of the parameters constraining women's political participation, particularly with respect to education and cultural norms informing gender constructs.

In reflecting on their experiences in the panchayats, female PMs responded as follows:

> My work has increased a lot. There are meetings every month but I have only been twice. I told the secretary to come to my house and take my signature because I have so much to do in the house - looking after kids, household chores; if I have to attend meetings I will have to have someone to do my chores.

> I don't ask what work is to be done or what work has been done. Why should I ask? I just give my signature.

> I did not know anything before and was afraid but now I have learned that I can use my tongue [voice] in favour of good things … and sehab will not beat me.

> I have done good since I have been a member.

The experiences and outcomes described by female PMs are varied. Some participants express pride in their new positions noting a sense of political engagement. Other participants point to the challenges found in integrating their responsibilities at the panchayat with their heavy, and yet unsupported, domestic work load. Comments which seem to demonstrate limited political engagement may likewise reflect women's responsibilities for an already enormous workload; perhaps for some women the

9

additional work required by the panchayat cannot be prioritized over their obligation to provide food and care for their children and husband.

When the only female district level officer was interviewed, she responded not only with respect to her own experiences, but also to those she observes among her female colleagues in gram panchayats:

> Our society is [a] patriarchal society and winds of change have very little affected rural areas. Women can't go a step forward without their men's consent. Our country is male dominated and in offices too, male colleagues do have their prejudices and complexes. They are not much interested in schemes for women or progress of women…I too work like you in rural areas and when I go and meet women in villages I feel that there is indeed little difference between them and me. I too face the problems they face. My dress is different, that is all.

Her comments aptly remind us of the broader context in which we must locate our analysis. In exploring how women's political participation, through the support of a quota system, operates as a tool for empowerment in rural Gujarat, the results of participant discourse guides us into a more reflective consideration of the multiplex factors layering the horizons of women's empowerment initiatives. For women, household obligations and child-care responsibilities significantly limit their participation in public life. Other constraining factors may include the distance, means and costs of travel to panchayat offices, lack of notification, as well as the timing of meetings, not to mention illness or fatigue. Immediate constraints, such as these, coalesce with women's lack of access to education, restrictions arising from adherence to age-appropriate activities, household dynamics and the necessary capitulation to male relations, all of which influence women's mobility and thus shape women's opportunities for political participation and their experiences within public office in rural Gujarat.

IV: DISCUSSION

Facilitating women's entry into the political sphere is a process of (re)negotiating the perceptions and norms behind female and male roles, relations, opportunities and responsibilities within households, communities and at the State level. As one of many initiatives for women's empowerment in India, the immediate goal of the panchayat quota system centers on numbers, that is, increasing the numbers of women in public office. However, as demonstrated through the results presented here, gender - the social norms, perceptions and meanings associated with being a woman or a man--significantly influences a woman's ability to embrace new and potentially empowering opportunities in the political arena. While the perception of achievements within a quota system is framed by numbers and would thus indicate a level of success in women's political participation through quota saturation, whether or not corresponding achievements in women's empowerment are reached deserves further analysis. It seems that quota saturation, in isolation, does not guarantee a level playing field for women in the political arena. Rather, it seems that achieving gender equity and women's empowerment depends on simultaneous attention to the mediating circumstances of women's lives (detailed Vissandjée et al., forthcoming).

In order to better understand how political participation is configured as a tool for

empowerment, both within rural Gujarat and in broader applications, we must familiarize ourselves with the playing fields on which strategies for gender equity and women's empowerment are mapped. Thus far, the scope of our discussion comprises three inter-related elements, namely gender, empowerment and democratic political participation. In this context, the experiences of being a woman in rural Gujarat and elsewhere also fit within the broader framework of international human development. In this arena we also find multiple number-based initiatives underway, indexing the experiences of women across the world struggling for equitable opportunities and well-being within endlessly complex power negotiations.

Broadly speaking, human development implies an impetus to move forward, to progress towards something better, particularly a higher standard of living. Achievements and failures in these pursuits are calculated according to a particular view of what development is, who it applies to and how it may be achieved. Yet, the processes towards development – and within this gender equity and women's empowerment – take place in the gendered spaces of social life, including economic and political sectors and cultural and religious prescripts. "Development", and the processes inherent in it, thus carries different meanings, experiences, and implications to different stakeholders (Gibson, 1991; Fraser & Tinker, 2004).

Since the mid-1990's, initiatives towards gender equity and women's empowerment have ranked third of eight MDGs and are seen as salient to all the other goals (Grown, et al., 2003). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to represent a central locus of development operations and are widely implicated in facilitating gender equity via various "empowering" initiatives, such as capacity-building and skill development workshops (Vyasulu & Vyasulu, 1999). Development initiatives such as these are plentiful throughout India; moreover, "gender" and "women's empowerment" now factor heavily into human development agendas in India. Through this, the processes and labours of development-focused NGOs are directly relevant to women's empowerment initiatives in India, including efforts within the panchayat system to facilitate women's political participation. More specifically, while India's 30% reservation for women operates primarily through a constitutional ammendment, NGOs function primarily as a bottom-up, needs-based endeavour to human development and women's needs and interests therein.

Efforts to recognize and integrate women's experiences and contributions in the processes of international development began with Boserup's work in the early 1970's (Fraser & Tinker, 2004) and continue in the present. Thus far, the successes and short-comings of women's empowerment initiatives have been principally evaluated through a standardized set of measures. In particular, in the development tool-kit, measures include the HDI (Human Development Index), the GDI (Gender-related Development Index) and the GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure). The HDI measures a country's relative well-being, both economically and socially, including variables such as education, income, health and life-expectancy. The GDI and GEM were both implemented in the mid 1990's. While the GDI simply disaggregates the HDI by sex, it thus measures gender disparity solely in terms of income; it does not measure disparities in terms of lost opportunities (see Bardhan & Klasen, 1999; Dijkstra, 2002; Kim et al., 2000). The GEM was constructed to measure gender equity at a global level in terms women's involvement in economic, political and professional spheres. As such, the GEM also designates many other aspects of women's lives, such as exposure to violence or reproductive capacities, to the periphery and thus, within the GEM, conceptualizations of

"gender, power and women's empowerment" remain poorly deployed (Wieringa, 2005). In similar fashion, the measuring stick of a quota system is also narrowly limited to quota saturation and does not take into account the processes of women's (s)election into public office or experiences therein, including decision-making contributions. As such, it is imperative to recognize that the outcomes achieved by development intiatives and political quotas are framed by what the tool-kits are and are not equipped to measure and what stacking the numbers can and cannot achieve.

Forgoing the numbers game

As developed in the post-WWII development praxis, the numbers generated by indicators such as the HDI, GDI and GEM are rooted in a form of development which too often advances a centralized perspective on how inequities can be overcome. Herein, gender disparities have often been reduced to mechanical problems wherein the "algorithms" of gender equity and women's empowerment are patterned on conventional models of socio-economic development. However, it is increasingly well recognized that a polarized focus on numbers does not hold accountable some of the key limitations of development strategies, thereby perpetuating false assumptions of equitable distributions of resources, services and opportunities in the wake of economic growth (Bardhan & Klasen, 1999; Kabeer, 2001; Kim et al., 2000).

Certainly, it is imperative that women's activities--in all domains--be accounted for; these statistics are used to generate the foundational data to track progress and generate an overview of achievements and shortcomings (Wieringa, 1994). However, relying on these numbers alone may facilitate a purely reactionary approach to women's needs and interests. The collection of these numbers must be regarded as a means to recognize disparities and achievements, not an end in and of themselves (see Kabeer, 2001). Where indices and quotas are regarded as marks of progress, as opposed to tracking mechanisms of progress, disparities may risk being recognized as the pathology, as opposed to the symptoms of pathologies (see Farmer, 2003). The pathology of persistent disempowerment is bred in inequitable access to resources and opportunities; for the women represented in this study, gender remains the fault-line prohibiting the (re)negotiation such inequities. While this may be made evident by numbers; substantial improvements in women's empowerment initiatives demand a renegotiation of the gender fault-lines.

At the intersection of State interests (India's 30% quota) and often competing development agendas, in this paper we have recounted a sampling of women's and men's experiences as political participants in rural Gujarat. With numbers accumulating on both ends, it is imperative to read between the lines of number-driven, quota-saturating strategies in order to surpass the smokescreen effect curtailing a more contextualized understanding of what the processes of gender equity and women's empowerment entail. Mounting more substantial transformations in gender-based disparities requires a further fleshing out of women's contributions, responsibilities and experiences in the overlapping individual, familial and political arenas. Doing so is critical in facilitating the conversion of narrow development models and measures as critiqued by Evans (1992), Kim, et al. (2000) and Wieringa (2005) into integrated initiatives that reflect and respond to social realities. For example, in the absence of redistributing resources and opportunities such as adequate health care, access to education, as well as responsibilities, such as child-care and house work, the projects and plans towards gender equity and women's empowerment fuel descriptive, though not necessarily substantive,

achievements. Furthermore, without redistribution in access and substantial leverage at the political negotiating tables, disparities remain complicit to predictable power fault-lines faced by women across the world, such as caste, class, religious or sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, ability, age, etc. Herein multiple forms of a singular power status-quo persists; it is backed by a theory of power in limited supply and maintained by the continual disregard for the substantial contributions made by women every day across the world. Instead, as advocated in Wieringa (1994), we endorse a more socially accurate approach towards women's empowerment which "… recognizes the political nature of development processes and stimulates women to become actively engaged as political actors" (833). In step, considering women's political participation as a tool towards empowerment must engage strategies to ensure that the conditions supporting empowering opportunities for women do exist. This depends upon making substantive changes with regard to the conditions and circumstances of women's lives, at home, in their communities and by the State; adapting the knowledge base, capacity and contributions of men in all these spheres is likewise necessary. It is through these lines of critical thinking and reflective planning that we must now grapple with the question of how to turn women's largely symbolic participation in Gujarat's panchayat system into empowering outcomes and experiences within more inclusively democratic political processes.

Conclusion: Substantiating the Tool-kit

While number-based strategies towards gender equity and women's empowerment are perhaps the most tangible way to track progress, a monitoring and evaluation framework with qualitative mechanisms to account for the nuances of women's and men's lived experiences and realities must constitute an integrated aspect of future strategies. Gender norms are almost impossible to overcome through the simplicity of a quota – therefore relying disproportionately upon quota fulfillment as a measure of successful strides towards women's empowerment is based upon unsubstantial evidence. As such, integrating women's interests and needs within these initiatives requires ongoing responses to and advances built upon coordinated efforts between institutionalized political life and in the communities and households wherein women and men live their daily lives. It also depends on a continually expanding conceptualization within development discourse and practice of who women are, what their interests and needs include, how women interact with the political system, what female-male relations entail in each of these domains, what empowerment means and pending this, how political participation contributes to women's empowerment.

As discussed by Wieringa (2005), empowerment is indeed an on-going process to be negotiated in our homes and communities, with democratically-elected State leaders and throughout international governing bodies. As with most processes, the roads are not only long, but are also freighted by the highly variable interests, needs and commitments of all actors. The processes of empowering women have been engaged by many insightful and dedicated individuals, communities and organizations. When women's empowerment is analyzed within a quota system the centrality of gender emerges as a significant fault-line. The panchayat thus mirrors gendered social realities, offering an accurate conceptualization of how complex the processes of democratic political participation and women's empowerment are, in India and elsewhere. As a means towards empowerment, women's political participation as a facilitated by a quota system may be substantially strengthened when the mediating experiences shaping women's

opportunties for political participation factor more thoroughly into the conscience of the State, development initiatives and women's male counterparts at every level of society. Doing so may lend considerable latitude to women's choices, resources and voices, thus substantiating women's agency in transforming how, when, to whom and to what extent their needs are met, their opportunities expand and their interests are achieved.

References
Ahern, P., Nuti, P, & Masterson, J. (2000). Promoting Gender Equity in the Democratic Process: Women's Paths to Political Participation and Decision-making. Synthesis Paper, International Center for Research on Women and the Center for Development and Population Activities. http://www.cedpa.org/publications/pdf/promotingprowid.pdf

Al-Tuwaijri, S. (2004). Gender, the MDGs and health research. In The 10/90 Report on Health Research 2003-2004, Switzerland: Global Forum for Health Research.

Arora, B. (1999). Women in Politics: Governance in Patriarchal and Non-Participatory Culture. Guru Nanak Journal of Sociology, 20(1-2), 111-118.

Banerjee, S. (2003). Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinzation of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India. Women's Studies International Forum, 26(2), 167-179.

Bardhan, K. & Klasen, S. (1999). UNDP's Gender-Related Indices: A Critical Review. World Development, 27(6), 985-1010.

Basu, A.M. (1990). Cultural Influences on Health Care Use: Two Regional Groups in India. Studies in Family Planning, 21(5), 275-286.

Chaudhuri, S. & Heller, P. (2002, July). The plasticity of participation: evidence from a participatory governance experiment. Paper presented at the Workshop on "Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives" held at the World Bank in Washington, DC on February 4th and 5th. Retrieved in April 2005 from http://poverty2.forumone.com/library/view/13892/

Chen, M.; Vanek, J.; Lund, F.; Heintz, J., Jhabvala, R. & Bonner, C. (2005). Women, Work & Poverty. Progress of the world's women 2005. New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women.

Dijkstra, A. G. (2002). Revisitng UNDP's GDI and GEM: Towards an Alternative. Social Indicators Research, 57, 301-338.

Evans, A. (1992). Statistics. In Ostergaard, L. (Ed.) Gender and Development: A Practical Guide (pp.11-40). London: Routledge.

Farmer, P. (2003). Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights and the New War on the Poor. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fraser, A., & Tinker, I. (2004). Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development. New York: First Feminist Press.

Gibson, C.H. (1991). A concept analysis of empowerment. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 16, 354-361.

Gilmer, J.S., Tripp-Reimer, T., Buckwalter, K.C., Andrews, P.H., Morris, W.W., Hayden, R., Lindencrona, C., & Evers, G. (1995). Translation and Validation Issues for a Multidimensional Elderly Self-Assessment Instrument. Western Journal of Nursing Research, 17(2), 220-226.

Gleason, S. (2001). Female Political Participation and Health in India. Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 573, 105-126.

Grown, C., Gupta, G.R., & A. Kes. (2005). Taking Action: Achieving gender equality

and empowering women. UN Millennium Project, Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. London: Earthscan.

Grown, C., Gupta, G.R., & Khan, Z. (2003, April). Promises to Keep: Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Background Paper of the Task Force on Education and Gender Equality: Millenium Project. Washington, D.C.: International Center for Research on Women.

Hampson, F. (2004). Empowering People at Risk: Human Security Priorities for the 21st Century. Report of the Helsinki Process on Globalization and Democracy, Track on Human Security. Retrieved in April 2005, http://www.helsinkiprocess.fi/netcomm/ImgLib/24/89/Track3.pdf

Huberman, A.M., & Miles,M.B. (1991). Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods. Brussels: Renouveau pédagogique, De Boeck.

Jacquette, S. (1997). Women in Power: From Tokenism to Critical Mass. In Foreign Policy 108, Autumn, 23-37.

Kabeer, Naila. (2001). Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought. London & New York: Verso.

Kanago, S.D. (1996). Panchayati Raj and Emerging Women Leadership: An Overview. Social Action, 46(1), Jan-Mar, 76-91.

Kim, J.Y., Millen, J.V., Irwin, A., & Gershman, J. (Eds.) (2000). Dying for Growth: Global Inequality and the Health of the Poor. Maine: Common Courage Press.

Lama, S.T. (2001). The Hindu Goddess and Women's Political Representation in South Asia: Symbolic Resource or Feminine Mystique? In International Review of Sociology, 11, (1), March, 5-20.

Lock, M. "Situating Women in the Politics of Health". In Sherwin, S (ed). (1998). The Politics of Women's Health: Exploring Agency and Autonomy. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Malhotra, A. (2003, February). Conceptualizing and Measuring Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development. Paper presented at the Workshop on "Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives" held at the World Bank in Washington, DC on February 4th and 5th. Retrieved in April 2005 from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPOWERMENT/Resources/486312-1095970750368/529763-1095970803335/malhotra2.pdf

McLean, I. (Ed.). (1996). Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

Moser, C. (1993). Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training. London and New York: Routledge.

National Human Development Report: India. (2001). Chapter 2: State of Human Development – Concept, Methodology, and Core Indices. Chapter 7: Governance for Human Development.
http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/genrep/nhdrep/nhdch7.pdf

Nussbaum, M. (2002). Sex, laws and inequality: what India can teach the United States. Daedalus, 131(Winter, 1), 95-106.

Peterson, S. & Runyan, A. (1993). Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics. Boulder: Westview Press.

Reid, A. (2003). Charismatic Queens of Southern Asia. In History Today, 53 (6), June, 30-35.

Richards, L., & Richards, T. (1997). NUD*IST 4. Melbourne, Victoria Australia: Qualitative Solutions & Research Pty Ltd.

Sen, G. (2005, January). What is it like to be a human being? Paper presented at the Third Forum on Human Development, Paris, France.

Sen, G., Germain, A., & Chen, L. (1994). Reconsidering Population Policies: Ethics, Development, and Strategies for Change. In Sen, G., Germain, A., & Chen, L. (Eds.), Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights (Harvard Series on Population and International Health) (pp.3-11). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Spero, J & Hart, J. (1999). The Politics of International Economic Relations: Glossary. Indiana University. http://www.indiana.edu/~ipe/glossry.html

Tremblay, M. & Pelletier, R. (2000). More Feminists or More Women?: Descriptive and Substantive Representations of Women in the 1997 Canadian Federal Elections. International Political Science Review, (21) 4, October, 381-405.

UNIFEM (2003). Progress of the World Report. Retrieved April 2005 from http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13081&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Uphoff, N. (2003). Some Analytical Issues in Measuring Empowerment for the Poor, With Concerns for Community and Local Governance. Paper presented at the Workshop on "Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives" held at the World Bank in Washington, DC on February 4th and 5th. Retrieved in April 2005 from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPOWERMENT/Resources/486312-1095970750368/529763-1095970803335/uphoff.pdf

Vissandjée, B., Abdool, S., & Dupéré S. (2002). Focus Groups in Rural Gujarat, India: A Modified Approach. Journal of Qualitative Health Research, 12(6), July, 826-843.

Vissandjée, B., Abdool, S., Dupéré S., & Mulay, S. (2000). An Account of Participatory Research with Women in Rural Gujarat. Canadian Journal of Development Studies, 21(Special Issue), 543-563.

Vissandjée, B., Abdool, S., Schotsman, A. & Dupéré, S. (2005, Forthcoming) Discerning Discrepancies in Women's and Men's Opinions: Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Rural India, A Gender Perspective.

Vyasulu, P & Vyasulu, V. (1999, March) Women in Panchayati Raj: Grassroots Democracy in India, Experience in Malgudi. New Delhi, India: United Nations Development Programme, Background Paper No. 4.

Wallerstein, N.B. & Bernstein, E. (1994). Introduction to Community Empowerment, Participatory Education, and Health. Health Education Quarterly, 21(2): 141-148.

Werner, D: Empowerment and Health. (1988). Presented at Christian Medical Commission/CCPD Joint Commission Meeting, Manila, Philippines, January 1988.

Wieringa, S.E. (2005). Measuring Women's Empowerment: Developing a Global Tool. In Truong, T., Wieringa, S., & Chachhi, A. (Eds). Engendering Human Security, Feminist Perspectives. (forthcoming).

Wieringa, S.E. (1998). Rethinking Gender Planning: A Critical Discussion of the Use of the Concept of Gender. In Gender, Technology and Development, 2 (3).

Wieringa, S.E. (1994). 'Women's Interests and Empowerment: Gender Planning Reconsidered.' In Development and Change, 25, 829-848.

World Bank (2003). India: Local Democracy and Empowerment of the Underprivileged – An Analysis of Democratic Decentralization. Shanghai Poverty Conference: Case

Study Summary. Retrieved April 2005 from http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/reducingpoverty/docs/newpdfs/case-summ-India-Evolution.pdf

Young, K. (1993). Planning Development With Women: Making a World of Difference. St. New York: Martin's Press.

Tables

Government Post	Sex	Age	Education	Other Occupation
Member of local government				
Panchayat members	2 ♀ 2 ♂	35–50 yrs	♀ = 2 illiterate	♀ = 2 housewives
			♂ = 1 illiterate, 1 primary school completed	♂ = 1 farmer, 1 agricultural labourer
Sarpanch	2 ♀ 2 ♂	45-60 yrs	♀ = 1 illiterate, 1 primary school completed	♀ = 1 farmer, 1 agricultural labourer
			♂ = 1 illiterate, 1 university graduate (graduate level)	♂ = 1 farmer, 1 press reporter
District level officers				
Officer of Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)	♀	40 yrs	University graduate	n/a
Officer of District Rural Development Agency (DRDA)	♂	47 yrs	University graduate + Certificate	n/a
GHSDP Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA)	♂	58 yrs	Secondary school completed	n/a
District Development Officer (DDO)	♂	40 yrs	University graduate	n/a
District Health Officer (DHO)	♂	49 yrs	University graduate	n/a

Table 1: Profile of Participants

These participants are not identified as conducting household work in addition to the named occupation. Though it is assumed, by the description of daily activities, that all women in the GHSDP are responsible (perhaps to different degrees) for household maintenance.

Membership in local government
How did you become a member of panchayat/Sarpanch/district officer? (probes for "tokenism")
How are decisions made in panchayat meetings/What is the process of decision-making in your district level agency? (probes for tokenism, women's decision-making power)
What is your role in the panchayat/district level agency?
How has your life changed since you became involved in local politics?
How do you perceive the role of women in politics? (reservations for women, participation of village women in Panchayats, etc.)

Table 2: Interview Questions