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Decentralization and Gender Equity

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Decentralization and Gender Equity

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Decentralization of powers, responsibilities, and resources to local governments is a way to bring government closer to the people and improve the quality of services and the efficiency with which they are delivered (Litvack, Ahmed and Bird 1998). Decentralization can also strengthen fiscal management, enhance private sector development, and increase local participation in decision-making (United Nations 2005). Under a decentralized system, it is anticipated that citizens will take a closer look at the decisions being made that affect them. For women, decentralization provides opportunities to become involved as municipal councilors and as users of government services. Proximity makes it easier for women to get involved and local services are often the ones they are most interested in – clean water, health, and primary education, for example. Research has also shown that female legislators change the way that politics is conducted --women are more likely to incorporate citizen input, emphasize communication, and act as facilitators, for example. In short, their different style of leadership compared to men will have an impact on the policy process.

This paper explores the gender dynamics of decentralization in developing and transitioning countries. The first section defines decentralization and outlines the potential benefits and accompanying challenges. The second section explores trends in decentralization in several countries around the world. The third section examines the role of women in decentralization. The fourth section identifies the barriers women face when trying to enter the political arena. The fifth section identifies some of the efforts around the world that have been used to reduce these barriers. The final section concludes the paper.

1. Decentralization

Decentralization is the assignment of fiscal, political, and administrative responsibilities to lower levels of government (Bird and Vaillancourt 1998; Blöchliger 2014).¹ Within the concept of decentralization, however, one can distinguish among three different approaches: deconcentration, delegation, and devolution (Bird and Vaillancourt 2006; Escolano et al. 2012). Deconcentration occurs when the central government disperses responsibilities for some services to regional or local offices of the central government. Deconcentration does not result in the transfer of any powers or authority to the local or regional offices. The decentralization that has occurred in many unitary countries takes the form of deconcentration because independent local governments do not exist and field offices of the central government are used to deliver services. Deconcentration also exists in federal countries where the federal government is interested in making sure particular services are being delivered across the country.

With delegation, the central government transfers responsibility for decision-making and the administration of public services to local governments that are not entirely controlled by the central government but are ultimately accountable to it (Litvack, Ahmad and Bird 1998). Local governments usually have considerable discretion in decision-making in this model. Delegation has been characterized by the principal-agent relationship whereby the central government is the principal and the local government is the agent. The main issue with this relationship is how to ensure that the local government faces incentives that encourage it to act as closely as possible to the wishes of the central government (Litvack, Ahmad and Bird 1998).

Devolution entails the central government transfer of authority for decision-making, finance, and management to local governments. Devolution usually involves the transfer of responsibilities for services to locally elected governments who raise their own revenues and have the authority to make investment decisions. Devolution is true decentralization.

Fiscal decentralization is concerned with who collects what taxes and who undertakes expenditures. It is also concerned with how to deal with any fiscal imbalance, which results from the devolution of expenditure responsibilities and taxes. In this context, six key questions arise in respect to intergovernmental finance

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Decentralization is a process of dispersing functions or responsibilities away from a central authority to sub-national governments and can occur in a unitary or federal country.

(Bird and Vaillancourt 2006, 2):

- Expenditure assignment: Who should do what?
- Revenue assignment: Who should levy what taxes?
- Vertical imbalance: How should any imbalance between the revenues and expenditures between different levels of governments be resolved?
- Horizontal imbalance or equalization: To what extent should fiscal institutions attempt to adjust for differences in needs and capacities between different sub-national government units?
- Access to capital markets: What, if any, rules should exist with respect to sub-national borrowing?

Each of the questions needs to be examined in the particular context of the country in which decentralization is occurring. The relevant policy objectives for a particular country may include not only the classic economic goals of efficiency, equity and stabilization, but also economic growth, regional balance, national integrity, and political stability (Bird and Vaillancourt 2006; Escolano et al. 2012).

The basic requirement for an efficient and effective sub-national government is to achieve what is known as the “matching principle” (Bird and Vaillancourt 2006). According to this principle, for any public service, the benefit areas (for example, school catchment area, areas served by public transit) should be matched by the financing areas (areas over which fees or taxes are being levied to finance the service). Moreover, expenditure responsibilities should be matched with revenue sources and revenue capacities should be matched with political accountability. In short, as closely as possible, those who benefit should be matched with those who pay and with those to whom the relevant political decision makers are politically accountable (Bird and Slack 2013).

Why do some countries choose to pursue decentralization? A primary reason is that there are problems with centralization. In countries with very large populations, for example, the central government cannot make efficient fiscal decisions for each and every local government

(Bahl 2008). Many countries have found a need for decentralization in the wake of increased democratization. Newly elected politicians at the sub-national level will frequently push for additional powers, roles, and responsibilities and central governments often comply with these demands (Blöchliger 2014; Escolano et al. 2012). In this sense, decentralization can be regarded as a nation-building exercise. When some countries have come together as unnatural partners, such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, decentralization can be a tool to pull the country together and promote national unity by moving some governance functions to the local level (Bahl 2008).

The literature sets out a number of benefits to decentralization. Perhaps the most often cited benefit is efficiency. As government moves closer to the people, services more closely reflect local preferences rather than being provided uniformly across regions. Responding to local preferences is especially important in countries with variations among regions in language, geography, climate, and the urban/rural split. To achieve efficiency, a few conditions need to be met, however. Local legislatures need to be accountable to the local population, the chief administrators of the local government need to be accountable to their legislature and not be appointed by the central government, local governments have to have some independent taxing powers, and local governments should be responsible for some important local government services and have the discretion over the level and composition of expenditures.

Decentralization provides the opportunity for greater accountability--when locally elected officials have increased responsibility for providing services, they are held to account to a greater degree by the local population (Bahl 2008). Local politicians have to respond to local demands in order to retain their positions. When local politicians are unable to shift responsibility and blame to central authorities, responsiveness inevitably increases. As a consequence of these local changes, citizen participation also increases, largely because local populations feel more control over service delivery in their area and believe they have more of a say in how they are governed (Bahl 2008).

Decentralization has also been shown to increase overall revenue mobilization by broadening the aggregate tax base. By doing so, it can also result in a reduction in intergovernmental transfers (Bahl 2008). Local governments have a much better understanding of local

economies and can more easily identify a tax base. For example, local administrators would be best positioned to establish and manage a tax on property because they have information on individual properties and their characteristics.

Notwithstanding the benefits of decentralization, there are some challenges. Central governments in developing and transitioning economies generally prefer to have more control over the economy, largely to prevent macroeconomic instability. Fiscal decentralization provides more fiscal authority to local governments, which could potentially increase macroeconomic instability if sub-central revenues decline or if local borrowing becomes excessive (Bahl 2008). Poor administration at the local level could also result in greater instability for fragile central economies. Finally, there is a belief that the potential for equalization is greater under revenue centralization (Bahl 2008; Blöchliger 2014). With greater decentralization, variation in fiscal conditions among local jurisdictions will mean that some local governments are unable to provide an adequate level of services without levying unduly high tax rates. Such a situation would necessitate some form of equalization to ensure that all local governments have adequate resources to meet their expenditure needs.

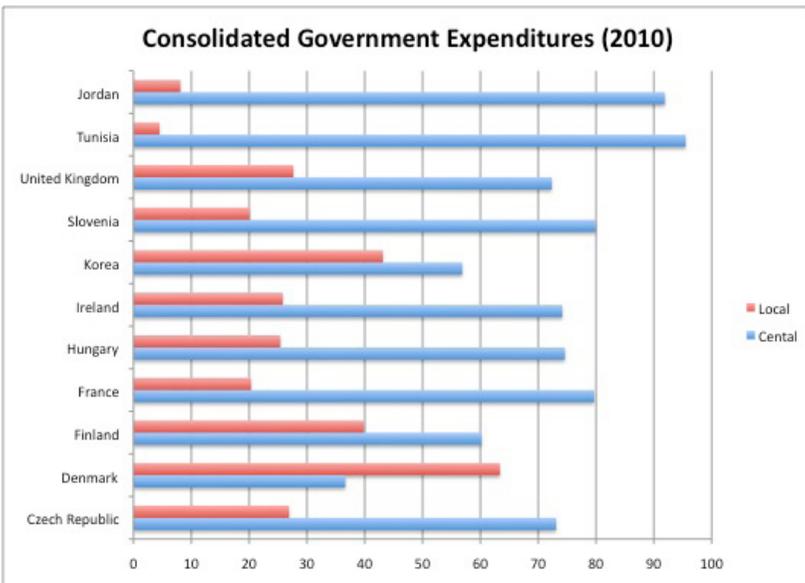
2. Trends in Decentralization

Trends in fiscal decentralization in unitary countries, as set out in Charts 1 to 3, highlight the variation in the degree of decentralization in Jordan and Tunisia and selected OECD countries with respect to: spending decentralization (ratio of sub-central spending to general government spending), revenue decentralization (ratio of sub-central own revenue to general government revenue), and tax revenue decentralization (ratio of sub-central tax revenue to general government tax revenue). Another important aspect of fiscal decentralization – tax autonomy (ratio of taxes over which sub-central government have some base or rate-setting autonomy to general government tax revenue) – is not presented graphically.

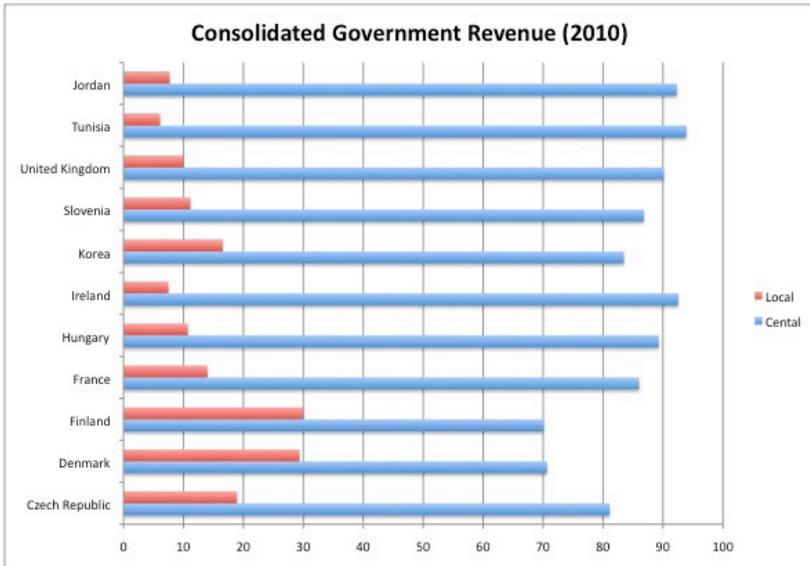
For the countries examined below, it is clear that spending has decentralized considerably more than revenues over the past 20 years. The result is an increasing vertical imbalance and growing intergovernmental transfers. Decentralization of expenditures and revenues in Jordan and Tunisia fall short of most of the OECD countries in the charts.

Local expenditures are still well below that of central governments. Expenditures tend to be more decentralized in Nordic countries, especially Denmark. The ratio between local and central expenditures however is not as large as the ratio between local and central government revenues in most countries, however. Consolidated government revenue for local governments varies quite considerably, but is consistently well below central and state governments. In some cases, such as Mexico, there is a wide disparity between the local level and the central government. In Denmark, there is more revenue decentralization than in other countries. With respect to consolidated tax revenue, it is clear that local governments have very little taxing power when compared to central governments. Again, Denmark stands out as having somewhat more local taxing power than the other unitary countries in the Charts.

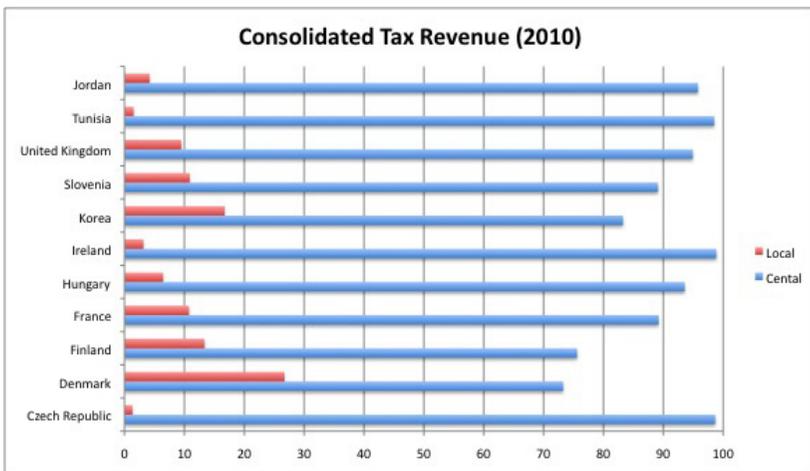
Chart 1: Consolidated Expenditures



Source: IMF (2011) and OECD (2012)

Chart 2: Consolidated Government Revenue

Source: IMF (2011) and OECD (2012)

Chart 3: Consolidated Tax Revenues

Source: IMF (2011) and OECD (2012)

3. Role and Impact of Women in Decentralization

One of the advantages of decentralization is that it opens up more access points for new political actors. Decentralization provides a greater opportunity for women to enter politics for a number of reasons. Local elections generally have lower campaign costs, largely because the scale is much smaller compared to national and state level elections (MacIvor, 1996; Maillé, 1994). Lower costs mean that there are smaller financial hurdles for women politicians to cross in terms of time and travel commitments (Brodie, 1985; Trimble, 1995). There is also less competition at the local level, which increases the probability of being elected (Gavan-Koop & Smith, 2008).

Increasing female participation at the municipal level may be the key to increasing participation at the national and sub-national levels because research has shown that political participation at the local level can serve as a “stepping stone” to senior levels of government (Adams & Schreiber, 2011). Women elected at the local level gain valuable experience and have a better chance of being elected at the provincial and national level because of their higher community profile and name recognition (Duerst-Lahti, 1998; Mariani, 2008; Palmer & Simon, 2003). Indeed, one explanation for the under-representation of women at senior levels of government is that there are not enough women in the “political pipeline” at the lower levels (Deckman, 2007). Duerst-Lahti (1998) argues that, “experience in one elected office is seen as providing credentials for other offices” (1998, 15).

Table 1 shows the rates of female representation in national parliaments by region around the world; Table 2 looks at female representation in Middle Eastern and Northern African (MENA) countries. As demonstrated in these tables, many regions of the world have made significant progress in the number of women represented in their lower and upper houses. Nordic countries, along with those in Europe and the Americas, have done particularly well at increasing the number of women in legislatures. There is some variation in MENA countries: Algeria and Tunisia have the highest percentage female representation at the lower house level; there are fewer women in the upper house or senate, however. The highest percentage in the upper house is in Jordan (at 12 percent) but other MENA countries are far behind. This trend is consistent with past research that has found that the percentage of women holding office declines as the importance

of the position increases. Putnam (1976) has dubbed this concept the “law of increasing disproportion.” Bashevkin (1993) referred to this phenomenon as “the higher, the fewer” (1993). This finding seems particularly relevant to the MENA region.

	Single House or Lower House	Upper House or Senate	Both Houses Combined
Nordic Countries	42.1%	-	-
Americas	25.7%	26.4%	24.8%
Europe (OSCE Member Countries including Nordic Countries)	25.3%	22.8%	24.8%
Europe (OSCE Member Countries excluding Nordic Countries)	23.7%	22.8%	23.5%
Sub-Saharan Africa	22.9%	19.8%	22.5%
Asia	19.0%	14.3%	18.5%
Arab States	17.8%	7.7%	15.9%
Pacific	13.4%	38.6%	16.2%

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2014)

Country	Lower or Single House	Upper House or Senate
Algeria	31.6%	7.0%
Tunisia	28.1%	-
Morocco	17.0%	2.2%
Libya	16.5%	-
Jordan	12.0%	12.0%
Lebanon	3.1%	-
Yemen	0.3%	1.8%

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2014)

Notwithstanding the statistics on representation, it is worth asking why it is so important to have more women in politics. Research shows that women can change the role of politics and legislative life because they bring a different viewpoint than their male counterparts (Newman & White, 2006; Darcy, Welch & Clark, 1994). This difference in focus alters the types of policies advanced. Research has also found that female representatives place a priority on issues that concern women, families, and children (such as clean water, primary schools, day care centers), while males prioritize financial and economic policy (Thomas, 1994; Dodson, 2006; Swers, 2002). Women have also been found to be more resistant to curbing the welfare state (Wolbrech, 2002) and more likely to criticize the status quo of democratic institutions (Bird, 2003). Simply put, the inclusion of women changes the focus of legislative bodies and produces different policy outputs than male-dominated bodies.

Not only are women found to change the focus of legislatures, but once in power, women also change the way that government works. Women in positions of power are more likely to appoint or hire other women to work within government, for example (Saltzstein, 1985). Women bring a different attitude to the job: they are more likely to incorporate citizen input into policy decisions and community involvement into decision-making; to emphasize communication; and to perceive themselves as “facilitators” (Fox & Schumann, 1999). Furthermore, female leaders are more likely to offer praise to employees and place a higher value on compromise (Lunneborg, 1990).

Municipal politics are particularly relevant to this discussion. A number of scholars and think tanks have called for increased representation of women for decades – perhaps none more so than the United Nations (UN). The work of the UN to increase the participation of women has its roots in the 1952 Convention on the Political Rights of Women, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Mowbray, 2011). A 1990 report by the UN introduced the concept of a level of “critical mass” – set at 30 percent - which represents the point necessary for women to make a visible impact on the style and content of political decision-making (Dahlerup, 2006). From that point forward, the 30 percent benchmark was held as a goal for countries and governments at all levels.

4. Barriers to Women in Politics

Scholars have identified many reasons for the under-representation of women at all levels of government. Some research has shown that women hold a disproportionate share of household and family responsibilities and, on average, have lower incomes and less financial freedom than men (Cool, 2011). Other research has argued that women have been socialized to view politics as an unsuitable vocation. Lawless and Fox (2005), for example, found that women were more than twice as likely as men to believe they were not qualified to run for office, even when men and women held similar qualifications. Some have suggested that the adversarial nature of politics discourages women from seeking elected office (Cool, 2011).

Based upon a workshop held in Tunis in 2013, a number of persistent barriers to female political participation have been identified in the MENA region.² As noted above, women hold a disproportionate share of household and family responsibility, meaning that devoting the time necessary to enter public life can be challenging. Women have lower incomes and less financial freedom than men. In some cases, women often do not even know their own salaries, as their pay goes directly to their husbands or fathers. In such cases, assembling the necessary funds to run an election, especially if a women's husband or father is not in support of the campaign, can be challenging. Indeed, women often need to gain the approval of husbands or fathers before entering public life and many families do not support such activity.

In many transitioning states, women are also socialized to believe that politics is an unsuitable vocation for women. Politics and government are seen as the unchallenged domain of men, and women who attempt to enter this sphere are routinely chastised for taking on a "non traditional" role. Because of this fundamental challenge to the social order, women can face violence – both physical and psychological – for deciding to enter politics. As a result, safety is a very real challenge to many women, as they are unable to travel freely on their own or campaign in the evenings. Another general problem, which was found to be more acute in transitioning states, is that women often do not support each other in their political ambitions. Where there should be a natural

² Much of the findings in this section stem from a report written by Enid Slack at the conclusion of the Inter-Regional Dialog for Senior and Middle Level Administrators on Local Governance and Gender in Decentralizing and Transitioning States, a conference sponsored by the Forum of the Federations - December 18 and 19, 2013.

support network, often none exists. Women often also lack political role models and mentors.

5. Overcoming the Barriers to Women in Politics

Different governments have responded to these barriers in different ways. In its new constitution, Tunisia emphasizes the role of the State in seeking to achieve parity between men and women on all elected councils – national, regional, and municipal. Under Article 34 of the constitution adopted in 2014, the State guarantees women's rights to election, voting, and candidacy and seeks to guarantee women's representation on elected councils. Under Article 46, the State commits to protecting the rights that women have achieved and seeks to support and develop them; it guarantees equal opportunities between men and women with respect to all of the various responsibilities in all fields; it seeks to achieve equal representation for women and men on elected councils; and it commits to taking the necessary measures to eliminate violence against women.

Some countries have implemented gender quotas for local government. For example, France passed the Parité Law in 2000, which required half of the candidates in all municipal, senate, and legislature elections to be women (Bird, 2003). The increase saw the number of women elected to council increase from 25.7 percent to 47.5 percent in the 2001 municipal elections (Bird, 2003). Gender quotas have also been tried in developing and transitioning countries. In 1992, for example, India amended its constitution to guarantee women 30 percent of the seats in local administrations – a change which saw more than one million women sit on municipal councils in 1994 (Kumari, 2005).

There are some problems with the use of quotas, however. In India, for example, the location of the reserved constituencies rotates after each election, and this can discourage parties from investing in women's political capacities (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2005). The result is that women are short-term participants in politics. This requirement can have the effect of changing political attitudes towards female inclusion, however, as voters get used to seeing women in the political arena.

Starting in 1997, Uganda reserved 30 percent of local council seats for all-female competition, meaning that only women could enter these particular elections, creating a set level of female representation (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2005). Much like India's system, however, there are some problems with this approach (see United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2005). The main problem is that these all-female seats are added seats and are not included in the proportion of existing seats. These wards are also usually hastily cobbled together from two or three existing wards, resulting in very large constituencies for women, meaning the scale and scope of their campaigns increases significantly over their male counterparts. These all-female races are held two weeks after the general election-- voter fatigue is higher and there is a failure to achieve quorum in many areas. After several attempts to re-run many elections to gain a quorum, many poor results have been accepted in the past, which ultimately undermines the legitimacy of female councilors. These all-female races also undermine the ability of women to compete with men in general elections. Not only are women dissuaded from entering general elections, they are also dissuaded from discussing issues in the general election, with many being told that "their time will come later."

Another local innovation to increase the influence of women and other members of the local population in decision-making is participatory budgeting, whereby citizens can decide on local matters, such as the location of street improvements or a park, as well as city-wide issues such as programs for helping the homeless population. Anyone interested in participating can do so individually or as part of an organization (such as a residents' association or women's group). Participatory budgeting improves communication and dialogue between city hall and citizens. It fosters social inclusion by allowing the poorest citizens to have a voice in budgeting decisions and it empowers neighbourhood associations and small organizations (UN Habitat 2009). Nevertheless, it can take a long time to implement budgetary decisions, in part because it is necessary to teach citizens the details of how the process works. Moreover, the number of people from the community that participate is often very small and they are not always representative of the youngest or the poorest in the population.

Participatory budgeting has largely been adopted in developing and transitioning countries over the past two decades to incorporate marginalized individuals who live in poor and under-served neighborhoods into decision-making (Wampler 2010). The first city to engage in participatory budgeting was Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989. Participatory budgeting is now used by 180 municipalities in Brazil and around Latin America. The process covers all capital expenditures, which range from 5 to 15 percent of the total budget of Brazilian municipalities. In Porto Alegre, the number of participants in the budgeting process is now more than 14,000 people per year. From 1989 to 1996, the number of households served by piped water and the municipal sewerage system increased significantly. By most accounts, participatory budgeting has been fairly successful, but as Wampler (2010) warns, the direct incorporation of citizens and community may also allow government officials to dominate the new institution, which inevitably subverts the original intent of many participatory institutions.

A variant of participatory budgeting is gender budgeting. Greater scrutiny of local spending is a natural consequence of greater decentralization. Gender budgeting entails the examination of local budgets from a gender perspective to ensure that spending on programs devoted to women is maintained (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2005, 199). This process is intended to raise awareness of the impact of local government spending upon programs related to women. South Africa and Uganda have engaged in this practice. There have also been some problems with this approach, however, such as the perception that women contribute little to local revenue and, thus, deserve little say in their expenditure (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2005, 199).

In Canada, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) argues that municipalities need to take responsibility for mentoring and training women and has recommended the creation of municipal campaign schools (FCM 2012). Campaign schools can outline the intricacies of serving in government and the regulatory environment that candidates operate in and also teach political skills, strategies, and tactics necessary to run and win an election. FCM also encourages municipalities to make senior staff available to provide information about municipal management and administration to potential female candidates (FCM 2012).

FCM contends that municipalities need to recruit female candidates by actively approaching women who would benefit from community life, as well as by recommending women to sit on municipal commissions, boards and committees as a preliminary step towards increasing the number of women in office (FCM 2012). Another recommendation for making municipal government more accessible to women is to provide information on how to access municipal government, which will inevitably lead to more women becoming interested in the process and possibly seeking office (FCM 2012). The role of municipal government is unclear to many people and there is even less clarity on how to become involved in municipal government.

Other recommendations include: mandating gender balance on committees, boards and commissions in order to involve more women in municipal decision-making; decreasing the length of council terms to create more vacancies to promote diversity on councils; imposing term limits and staggering terms to ensure a complementary blend of experienced and new councilors; and creating a culture of respect in local governance (FCM 2012). Councils can change their culture by developing and enforcing a code of ethics to prohibit demeaning conduct towards fellow councilors and create a mediation committee with trained staff to deal with conflict issues (FCM 2012).

6. Final Comments

Decentralization brings government closer to the people and allows citizens to take a closer look at the decisions that affect them. For women, decentralization provides opportunities to scrutinize how well local services that they are interested in are being provided and how the decisions are being made around the provision of those services. Decentralization also provides women with more opportunities to become involved politically. How decentralization works for women in practice, however, depends on their ability to participate in the political process and to exert pressure on political leaders. There are still many barriers – cultural, societal, and institutional -- to sustained female participation in local government.

In addition to gender quotas (which have advantages and disadvantages), other suggestions that have been put forward to include women in the political process include providing information on how municipal government works and how to enter politics. Countries

also need to promote an awareness of the role that women can play in government – and this role needs to be understood by both men and women. More generally, there needs to be a greater focus on citizenship awareness and education on women’s rights and the role that women can play as well as the important role of women in a decentralized system.

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(Footnotes)

1 The data in Table 1 and Table 2 has been compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary union on the basis of information provided by National Parliaments by 1 June 2014. The percentages do not take into account the case of parliaments for which no data was available at that date. More information can be found at: <http://ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> and <http://ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

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