

Securing women's participation in local government

Local government is the sphere of government that is regarded as being closest to the people. Municipalities are instrumental in providing basic services to communities. Women are often the main consumers of these services due to the caregiver role they play and are thus likely to feel the impact of local government the most.

It is therefore important that they should have a say in how, where and when municipalities provide services and that they should be part of the decision-making process.

This article explores some of the ways that women's participation in local government may be enhanced. From the outset, it is important to distinguish between the internal and external dimensions of government, both of which affect women's involvement. The internal dimension mainly deals with issues such as structures, systems, policies and processes in the municipality, while the external dimension deals with the municipality's relationship with the community.

Why women in local government?

There are legal, political, moral, and economic imperatives that make gender equity compulsory.

key points

- Mandatory quota and capacity building programmes are needed to enhance women's participation in local government.
- Gender sensitive policies and programmes are needed to secure women's representation.

Firstly, from a constitutional law perspective, the Bill of Rights clearly deals with the issue of equality and states that it means the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. The Constitution established the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) to ensure that gender equality is promoted and realised.

Further, the Promotion of Equality and the Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act provides a legal mechanism with which to confront and address inequality. This Act places a positive duty on the state – which includes local government – to promote equality.

From a political point of view, marginalised groups, of which women form a part, need to be encouraged to participate in local government. This goes to the core of democracy and political legitimacy, since democracy means much more than just voting. It requires that there be representative leadership and that the interests of the whole community are taken into account when resources are allocated. Local government cannot claim to be representative if women are under-represented in councils and in the administration, and if their needs are not adequately met.

There is also a moral imperative for local government to promote the alleviation of poverty and ensure a safety net for the most vulnerable. In most rural communities and elsewhere in the country, the majority of the poor are women. Poverty eradication strategies must therefore take

women's day-to-day realities into account. The availability of services, such as electricity and water, and of clinics and other community facilities, can alleviate the burden of family care. Women's participation in developing poverty eradication strategies can enhance effective planning to ensure appropriate services where they are most needed. Similarly, women's involvement in the local economic development strategy in municipalities is important so that their needs can be catered for in an efficient way and so that they can be part of the municipality's development.

Economic growth strategies are closely linked to anti-poverty strategies. However, unless informal economic activities are included, economic growth will only benefit a privileged minority. As most women participate in the informal sector, their contribution to the economy is overlooked and undervalued. Consequently, local government must help improve the informal sector as part of its economic growth strategy.

Quota system

Political willpower and political structures can play a prominent role in securing women's representation in government. However, they can also present obstacles for women. Nominations and selection processes in some political parties reflect a bias towards male candidates. This is largely because potential candidates are usually people who are visible in their community through either their profession or through holding public office. This disadvantages women because disproportionate numbers of community leaders are male. Moreover, political life appears to follow a masculine model and the rules of the game and standards of evaluation have traditionally been defined by men. Until the systemic obstacles that hamper women's participation in local government politics are removed, a quota system is the only measure that will ensure equality for women.

In terms of the Structures Act, "political parties must seek to ensure that 50% of candidates on their party list are women and that women and men are evenly distributed through the list". This requirement stops short of intro-

ducing a statutory gender quota aimed at increasing the quantitative representation of women. Instead, the word 'seek' gives discretion to political parties to adhere to this requirement. Political parties can set quotas to include a certain percentage of women on their lists, which happened with remarkable success in the recent national election.

The existing provision does not ensure that women and men are evenly represented on municipal councils. A mandatory provision requiring that 50% of seats be allocated to female councillors would address this problem.

Capacity building

The implementation of a quota system would, however, only deal with the quantitative aspect of women's representation. Little has been done to improve the qualitative role women can play in municipal councils. Women representatives often have little impact on the internal affairs of local government. It is thus advisable that a quota system is coupled with proper support programmes, focusing on information sharing or education, training and capacity building, public education and awareness and financial support for independent women candidates.

Capacity building is extremely important for women at all levels in municipalities, both council and administration. Councillors should be provided with opportunities for training and confidence building, such as training in media relations, public speaking, assertiveness, mentoring and networking. They should also be provided with information and support so that they have a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Increasing the number of women in local government is not sufficient to transform its prevalent organisational culture and work practices, which reflects dominant societal perceptions, values and customs. It is crucial that municipalities take up the interests of women, possibly through such mechanisms as gender equity committees and gender budgets, to review councils' planning and implementation to meet the needs of both genders equitably.

Policies and programmes should be devised and implemented to make local government a more enabling environment for women. These might include favouring women in job selection and promotion and making provision for training, development and mentoring. In a male-dominated work environment, women's issues often get sidelined. For example, meetings may continue until after working hours without arrangements being made for childcare. Paying greater attention to the needs of female employees will improve their capacity to participate.

Ward committees

Ward committees provide an important opportunity to build women's capacity and self-confidence. It is thus important for women to be represented on these structures. Ward committees act as a formal communication channel between the community and council, enabling municipalities to translate women's representation into active participation to ensure that gender-specific needs are met.

Electoral system

Women fare much better in a proportional representation system than when they stand as ward candidates. Currently only 10% of all ward councillors are women, compared to 27% of all candidates elected through party lists. A system of proportional representation is thus more conducive to facilitating women's access to political office, as parties can actively support and promote women in political leadership positions.

The Structures Act changed the electoral system used in the 1995/6 local government elections from a ward base of 60% and a proportional base of 40% to a system in which they were equal in the 2000 elections. This had a positive impact on the representation of women in local government structures. However, although the Structures Act requires that parties ensure that women are evenly distributed on their lists, a closed list system is still applied making it difficult to see exactly where women are placed. As such, while there may be sufficient women on the party list, they are usually at the bottom and have a slim chance of being in government.

Community participation

Municipalities must develop a participatory culture of municipal governance to complement formal representative government. This process of integration is important for improving management and service delivery. Three elements of participatory governance are involved. Firstly, municipalities must foster participation in the IDP process, performance management, the budget process and in strategic decisions regarding service delivery. Secondly, they must enable participation through capacity building among staff and councillors. Thirdly, funds must be allocated and used for these purposes.

Municipalities must also establish mechanisms, processes and procedures to enable community participation to take place. Besides setting up ward committees, the council may also establish advisory committees comprising persons who are not councillors, taking gender representation into account in the appointment of its members.

The special needs of women should be taken into account when municipal councils have public meetings. For example, when planning a public meeting, a council must try to accommodate women's needs in both the time and venue chosen, as these may otherwise effectively preclude women's attendance.

Conclusion

A mandatory quota system is necessary to achieve the equal distribution of women and men in local government. This should be accompanied by capacity building programmes. Further, women's participation can be enhanced through ensuring their representation on ward committees and in community participation initiatives. Finally, existing legislative measures to enhance the participation of women should be strengthened.

Geraldine Mettler
Transformation Manager
Drakenstein Municipality