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## Decentralizing government and centralizing gender in Southern Africa: lessons from the South African experience

**Occasional paper**

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**Occasional Paper 8**

**Decentralizing Government and  
Centralizing Gender in Southern Africa:  
Lessons from the South African Experience**

by Jo Beall  
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# acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
APF	Anti-Privatization Forum
CGE	Commission on Gender Equality
GAP	Gender Advocacy Programme
GRB	gender responsive budget
IDP	integrated development plan
IULA	International Union of Local Authorities
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
NWLG	National Women's Lobby Group
OMM	Organization of Mozambican Women
PR	proportional representation
SADC	Southern African Development Community
TLGFA	Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act
WBI	Women's Budget Initiative
WEDO	Women and Environment Development Organization
WLGf	Women in Local Government Forum
WPSU	Women in Parliament Support Unit
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front
ZNWL	Zambian National Women's Lobby

# summary résumé resumen

## SUMMARY

Decentralization is frequently presented as an important vehicle for increasing women's representation and political participation. However, the benefits for women of devolved local government are not always obvious. The paper starts from the premise that local government is in an ambiguous position. It is the part of the state that is located closest to the people and to organized civil society. As such it has the potential to engage more effectively with women who are often confined through their domestic responsibilities to public engagement close to home, but because of its closeness to society the local state can become too close to social institutions. In Africa, the latter can be deeply patriarchal, illustrated for example by the role of traditional authorities both in everyday life at the community level and in local government. When local government is impervious to progressive social change it may be an unreliable site for the pursuit of gender equity, particularly in contexts where women are making gains within the formal institutions of the state. As such it stands as a litmus test of not only democratic decentralisation but of engendered democracy more generally.

These arguments are taken up in the context of an exploration of decentralization and local democracy in Southern Africa. An overview of some of the regional issues is provided through a study of Angola and Mozambique, which are discussed as two countries that have experienced sustained civil war, and Zimbabwe and Zambia that experience greater and lesser degrees of conflict in the context of economic stress and fragile states. The paper then explores in greater depth the case of South Africa, which has undergone a relatively stable transition from apartheid, accompanied by a commitment to gender inclusive politics and policy. Here it is demonstrated that even in a seemingly best-case scenario such as South Africa, engendered processes of local level democratization and service delivery are difficult to achieve. Two conclusions are drawn. The effective involvement of women in local governance is predicated both on the approach adopted by political parties and on how women are organized at the local level. However, even when women are effectively organized and represented locally, the close association between decentralization and neo-liberal policies serves to undermine the potential for gender-sensitive service delivery.

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## RÉSUMÉ

La décentralisation est souvent présentée comme un moyen important d'élargir la représentation et la participation politique des femmes. Cependant, les avantages que tirent les femmes d'un transfert de pouvoir aux autorités locales ne sont pas toujours évidents. L'auteur commence par poser l'hypothèse que le pouvoir local se trouve dans une situation ambiguë. Comme partie de l'Etat la plus proche de la population et de la société civile organisée, l'autorité locale peut laisser une plus grande place aux femmes, qui doivent souvent se borner, du fait de leurs responsabilités domestiques, à exercer des fonctions publiques près de chez elles, mais de part cette proximité, l'autorité locale peut aussi être trop proche des institutions sociales. En Afrique, celles-ci peuvent être profondément patriarcales, comme le montre par exemple le rôle que jouent les autorités traditionnelles à la fois dans la vie quotidienne de la communauté et dans le gouvernement local. Lorsque les autorités locales résistent à un changement social progressif, il vaut peut-être mieux ne pas compter sur elles pour travailler à l'instauration de l'équité entre les sexes, en particulier dans les pays où les femmes progressent dans les institutions officielles de l'Etat. Elles constituent donc le test suprême non seulement de la décentralisation démocratique mais plus généralement de l'ouverture de la démocratie aux femmes.

Ces arguments sont repris dans le contexte d'une étude de la décentralisation et de la démocratie locale en Afrique australe. Une étude de l'Angola et du Mozambique, qui ont tous deux connu une longue guerre civile, et du Zimbabwe et de la Zambie, pays fragiles secoués à des degrés divers par des conflits dus aux tensions économiques, donne une vue d'ensemble des problèmes de la région. L'auteur se livre ensuite à un examen plus approfondi du cas de l'Afrique du Sud, qui a connu une transition relativement stable depuis l'apartheid, transition qui s'est accompagnée d'une volonté d'intégrer les femmes à la vie politique et de tenir compte de leurs préoccupations dans l'élaboration des politiques en général. Il est démontré ici que même dans le meilleur des scénarios, qui est apparemment celui pour lequel a opté l'Afrique du Sud, il est difficile d'organiser la vie démocratique locale et les services de manière à tenir compte des différences entre les sexes. L'auteur en tire deux conclusions. La participation effective des femmes à la gouvernance locale est tenue pour acquise tant dans l'approche des partis politiques que dans la manière dont les femmes sont organisées au niveau local. Cependant, même lorsque les femmes sont bien organisées et représentées au niveau local, l'association étroite entre décentralisation et politiques néolibérales réduit à néant la perspective de voir offrir aux femmes, comme aux hommes, des services qui répondent à leurs besoins propres.

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## RESUMEN

La descentralización se presenta con frecuencia como un mecanismo importante para incrementar la representación y la participación política de las mujeres. Sin embargo, desde el punto de vista de las mujeres, los beneficios de la descentralización del gobierno no son siempre evidentes. El presente documento parte del principio de que la posición del gobierno local es ambigua. Es la parte del Estado que está más cerca del pueblo y de la sociedad civil organizada. Como tal, puede atender más eficazmente a las necesidades de las mujeres, que suelen verse obligadas, por sus tareas domésticas, a trabajar cerca del hogar. No obstante, precisamente por su proximidad a la sociedad, el gobierno local puede llegar a estar demasiado cerca de las instituciones sociales. En África, estas últimas pueden ser sumamente patriarcales, como muestra por ejemplo, el papel que desempeñan las autoridades tradicionales tanto en la vida cotidiana en el plano de la comunidad como en el gobierno local. Cuando el gobierno local es refractario al progreso social, es poco probable que avance hacia la igualdad de género, en particular en contextos en los que las mujeres están realizando progresos en las instituciones oficiales del Estado. Por lo tanto, se trata de una prueba decisiva, no sólo para la descentralización democrática, sino también para una democracia con igualdad de género en términos más generales.

Estas cuestiones se consideran en el contexto del análisis de la descentralización y la democracia local en África meridional. Se ofrece una visión general de algunas de las cuestiones regionales mediante un estudio de Angola y Mozambique, que se presentan como dos países que han sufrido una guerra civil constante, así como de Zimbabwe y Zambia, que experimentan conflictos de mayor o menor grado en un clima de tensión económica y de Estados frágiles. A continuación se examina más detalladamente el caso de Sudáfrica, que ha experimentado una transición relativamente estable del apartheid a la democracia, acompañada de un compromiso con una política de igualdad de género. Aquí se ve que incluso en una situación óptima, como en el caso de Sudáfrica, es difícil lograr procesos de democratización y prestación de servicios a nivel local que tengan en cuenta las especificidades del género. Se llega a dos conclusiones. La participación real de las mujeres en el gobierno local se basa tanto en el enfoque adoptado por los partidos políticos como en el modo en el que éstas se organicen localmente. Sin embargo, incluso cuando las mujeres se organizan eficazmente y están representadas a nivel local, la estrecha asociación entre la descentralización y las políticas neoliberales menoscaba el potencial de una prestación de servicios que tenga en cuenta el género.

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# introduction

The global trend towards localization—the decentralization of public roles, resources and responsibilities—is frequently presented as an important vehicle for increasing women’s representation and as a means by which their policy priorities and political participation can be guaranteed.

However, the reality is not always as clear-cut or the benefits for women as obvious as is sometimes claimed. Even the celebrated South African experience of democratic reform demonstrates that local government poses immense and particular challenges for advancing gender equality. Indeed, it is argued that local governance acts as a leveller and litmus test in democratic decentralization. A twofold argument is advanced in this regard. First, in relation to local democracy, it is suggested that the effective involvement of women in local governance is predicated both on the differential impacts of political parties and on how women are organized at the local level. Second, this paper makes the case that the close association between decentralization and neo-liberal policies serves to undermine the potential for gender-sensitive service delivery, even when political conditions are favourable.

The argument rests on an analysis of state–society relations that owes much to Tripp’s (2000) identification of what she sees as one of the central dilemmas in African politics, *societal autonomy*. On the basis of her work in Uganda, she argues that women there are particularly well situated to assert associational autonomy, and that the Ugandan women’s movement differs from many other women’s and social movements in Africa because it has been able to maintain considerably greater autonomy from the state. Tripp’s concern with state limits on societal autonomy is taken up here in relation to decentralization and local democracy in Southern Africa. The paper starts from the premise that local government is in an ambiguous position. It is the part of the state that is located closest to people and organized civil society. As such, it has the potential to engage with women in exactly the ways anticipated by those who see local government and decentralization as good for women. Nevertheless, precisely because of its closeness to society, the local state also has to avoid becoming too closely intertwined with social institutions. In Africa, many of the societal institutions that permeate local governance systems and procedures, notably customary law and traditional authority, are deeply patriarchal and are based on relations of power that are difficult for women to penetrate or challenge. Hence, from a gender perspective there is an equally strong argument that local government is relatively impervious to social change, particularly in contexts where women have made gains within the formal institutions of the state.

These issues are explored in relation to five Southern African countries. Angola and Mozambique are discussed as two countries that have experienced sustained civil war. In the case of Angola there has been a subsequent absence of effective politics and government, while in Mozambique a strong political system has emerged. Zimbabwe and Zambia are discussed as two countries that both have fragile state systems. However, whereas in Zimbabwe this is accompanied by oppressive politics, in Zambia there is still some space for open governance. In each case, the opportunities for women’s organization and concerted engagement with state institutions are explored, and the role of societal and local state autonomy in outcomes is considered. The paper then turns to the case of South Africa. Particular attention is paid to South Africa because of its celebrated status in relation to its constitutional commitment to non-sexism and its gender inclusive politics. This section of the paper examines the extent to which South Africa’s reputation for advancing gender equity can be sustained, and the part played by societal and local state autonomy in achieving this. This part of the paper is more substantial, drawing on primary research on decentralization and local governance, particularly in relation to the role of traditional authorities. Here it is demonstrated that even in a seemingly best-case scenario such as South Africa, engendered processes of local-level democratization and service delivery are difficult to achieve.

II.

# decentralization and engendering democracy

From the early 1980s, countries throughout the world began experimenting with some form of decentralization, early examples in sub-Saharan Africa being Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zambia (Conyers 1983). By the mid-1990s, 80 per cent of countries—with very different political dispensations—were engaged in some form of decentralization (Crook and Manor 2000). Decentralization is a slippery term that can be understood in two distinct but related senses.

First, in an administrative sense decentralization refers to the transfer of responsibility for planning, management, and the raising and allocation of resources from the central government and its agencies to subordinate units or levels of government, semi-autonomous public authorities or corporations, regional functional authorities, or non-governmental private or voluntary organizations (Rondinelli et al. 1983). Second, decentralization can be defined as a policy framework “in which public goods and services are provided primarily through the revealed preferences of individuals by market mechanisms” (Rondinelli et al. 1989:59). Manor (1999:5) claims further that decentralization can have a more explicitly democratizing function as well.

Advocates argue that decentralization processes can make government more responsive and citizens more engaged (Ostrom et al. 1993; Putnam 1993; World Bank 1994, 1997). Opponents are more sceptical, pointing to the tendency of local government to pork-barrel politics and highlighting its potential for elite capture. Some also point to the lack of adequate tax bases at the local level and the limited human and financial resources available, given the increasing demands being made on lower tiers of government (Samoff 1990; Schuurman 1997; Slater 1989). In fact, it has been pointed out that there is little empirical evidence to support or refute the efficacy of decentralization (Faguet 2003; Manor 1999), while Heller (2000) has argued that “there are no a priori reasons why more localized forms of governance are more democratic”. Under such conditions, it is particularly difficult to assess the implications of decentralization for women.

The International Union of Local Authorities (IULA 1998:1) has argued in a position paper on women in local government that:

From a gender perspective local government is the closest and is the most accessible level of government to women. Local governments traditionally provide services utilized by individual households such as electricity, waste disposal, public transport, water, schools, health clinics and other social services. The decisions of local governments therefore have a direct impact on the private lives of women, because they are traditionally responsible for providing for and caring for the family and the home in many countries. Women also have important and unique contributions to make to the development and appropriate management of these services. They must be fully part of the local democratic system and have full access to the decision making structure. Until the interests of women have been represented at the local level, the system is not fully democratic.

The reasons why it is thought that women participate more easily in local than in national politics are well rehearsed. For example, Evertzen (2001:3) cites the following:

eligibility criteria for the local level are less stringent, and local government is the closest to the women's sphere of life, and easier to combine with rearing children. It can be the first level that women can break into and as such it may serve as a springboard to national politics, by developing capacities and gaining experiences. Likewise local politics can be more interesting to women as they are well acquainted with their community, being the major users of space and services in the local community (water, electricity, waste disposal, health clinics, and other social services). They also participate actively in organizations in their neighbourhood, and it's easier to involve these organizations in formal political decision making at the local level.

It is perspectives such as these that have often been marshalled by donors and international agencies in support of decentralization as a route towards women's emancipation and gender equity. Here there are expectations that decentralization improves democracy; for example, that it increases the access of women to decision-making, and that women find it easier to participate as political representatives in local rather than higher tiers of government. There are also expectations that decentralization will make service delivery more gender sensitive, for example because of the proximity of locally elected representatives to their constituents, leading to improved knowledge and understanding on the part of local government representatives of the gender dimensions of service requirements. Lastly from an efficiency angle, the community-level engagement of women is believed to make them an asset in local planning and management.

While unrestrained democratic decentralization may promise much for women, the conditions under which decentralization is advanced are rarely ideal, as Manor (1999:97) has pointed out:

The limited evidence available on the impact of decentralization on women's interests offers only modest encouragement. It appears that the empowerment of arenas at or near the local level, where prejudices against women are often stronger than at higher levels, may damage their prospects unless provisions are made to give women a meaningful voice. In some systems, some seats on councils are reserved for women nominees. This holds little promise for them, because they tend to be beholden to the male leaders who secured their nomination. Their best hope lies in the reservation of seats for which only women candidates can stand for election, but this appears to have been attempted in only a few places—notably India. Even there, it has so far yielded only minimal benefits.

One of the reasons why local governance is so often a disappointing arena for women is that it is often responsive or open to informal institutions and relations of power that undermine or bypass formal rules and procedures. Women's historical exclusion from local government means that they do not have access to many of the informal networks that sustain and reproduce the institutions and social practices that make up local governance. Moreover, many of the informal institutional relationships that shape local governance are hostile to or exclusionary of women. However, in situations where women are adept at developing alternative institutions and are allowed the space to do so, local governance can constitute an important site for advancing women's rights.

III.

## women and local governance in southern africa

International experience shows that if the interests of women are going to be represented, a critical mass of women representatives is necessary. Southern African Development Community (SADC) governments recently committed themselves to ensuring that women occupy at least 30 per cent of the positions in political and decision-making structures by the year 2005.<sup>1</sup> The commitment came with the signing of the SADC Gender and Development Declaration in 1997 (SADC 1997) and

although the 30 per cent target falls short of the global 50–50 campaign launched by the Women and Environment Development Organization (WEDO 2000), governments in Southern Africa have gone further in meeting these targets than in many other regions of the world. The region is second only to Scandinavia in this regard (Louw Morna 2004), despite having started from a much lower base.<sup>2</sup> Already in two Southern African countries (South Africa and Mozambique), close to 30 per cent of members of parliament are women; three other countries have a number of women appointed to senior decision-making positions in the public service (Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland), while in Namibia women hold over 40 per cent of posts in local government (SADC 1999). In the case of Mozambique and South Africa, success stems largely from the fact that the ruling parties, Frelimo and the African National Congress (ANC) respectively, have internal party lists with 30 per cent quotas for women. Together with Tanzania, which also has a system of reserved seats for women in the national assembly, these countries contribute significantly to the regional average of 19.4 per cent of women in parliament, which is higher than the global average of 15.4 per cent.

At local government level, Namibia is a particularly good performer. This can be put down to parliament enacting legislation requiring political parties and residents' associations to include a certain minimum number of women on their candidate lists, prior to the local authority elections in 1992. This brought the proportion of women councillors in local governments to 38 per cent. In 1996, parliament strengthened this affirmative action legislation, which resulted in over 40 per cent of the elected local councillors being women at the next election. In fact, almost half of the candidates put forward by political parties and residents' associations were women. However, women were placed at the bottom of the lists. Had the parties used what are called in Southern Africa, "zebra" lists, alternating women and men, Namibia might well have met the WEDO target of 50 per cent women councillors in local authorities. These figures stand as a challenge to those opposed to quota systems for women and are important. Nevertheless, it is equally important to get beyond the headcounts and to understand something of the texture of local governance and decentralization for women, explored in the following sub-sections.

1 This percentage is thought to give rise to enough of a critical mass for women to make a difference and is based on a recommendation by the 1990 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNDP 1995).

2 In the Nordic countries gender parity has almost been achieved in parliament, cabinet and the bureaucracy, and research has shown that an increased number of women brings a strong social justice agenda to governance (Staudt 1998).

## III.A.

*angola and mozambique:  
how women fare in the wake  
of war*

Both Angola and Mozambique have been affected by civil wars that served to undermine effective governance. In the case of Angola the war was protracted over decades, effectively destroying local government and public services across large parts of the country. The decentralization plans that were part of the democratic reforms of the early 1990s

had to be shelved as a result, so that Angola retains a system of sub-national government based entirely on the nomination of officials from above. In reality, for much of rural Angola, lower-tier institutions of government have not existed in any real sense for years (Hodges 2001:61). Many parts of Angola are run by governors who are no better than warlords and who finance their fiefdoms through corruption and patronage. Chabal and Daloz (1999) have shown how those who sought to profit from breakdown largely drove the violent conflict and chaos in the country, and the political legacy of civil war has been the infiltration of state institutions, such as they are, and of state functions by the most dubious elements of society. The impact on women of war and social and political breakdown has been poignantly described by Brittain (1998:88):

So desperate had the struggle to survive become that morality was eroded even in the professions built on morality and altruism. A nurse would let a child with meningitis die, keeping the prescribed drug to sell in the market so that she could feed her own child rather than let him starve on what her salary could buy. A child referred for a blood transfusion by a doctor could be turned away by the nurse administering the transfusions because the child, or its family, had no bribe to pay her.

Moreover, in a context where kleptocratic governors and exploitative gang masters control decision-making and resources at the sub-national level, and where women are simply struggling to survive and save their children, it is not surprising that figures for women's participation in local government were impossible to find. In contemporary Angola the fundamental ingredients for engendering democratic decentralization—men and women's morale, confidence and trust—are profoundly absent. It seems that a vital component of institutional reform and political reconstruction needs to be the building of both society and the state from the bottom up, if women are ever to participate and see their policy issues addressed.

The experience of Mozambique, also once a war-torn country, suggests that things can be different. Despite the ravages of conflict on women (Urdang 1989) as well as the negative impact of privatization policies thereafter (Pitcher 2002), there has been a long history of commitment to women's emancipation on the part of the Frelimo government. This helped secure for women enhanced access to government at all levels. However, it is important to note that this began with the active mobilization of women at grassroots level. When the Organization of Mozambican Women (OMM) was formed under Frelimo, women were organized in local communities and branches of the OMM were formed. When the influence and control of Frelimo became too pervasive, the OMM became an autonomous women's organization. Although still very close to the ruling party, the OMM keeps an arm's length relationship to it; this, together with the continued influence of locally organized women with roots in communities, has served to resist the centralization and full-scale co-optation of the OMM. This in turn has allowed women in Mozambique to demand responsiveness and accountability from local government. In terms of representation, although the number of women participating in local government in

Mozambique has not yet matched their 30 per cent quota in the national parliament, the country is aiming for 30 per cent local representation of women in the next local elections. The OMM has thus been influential not only in developing women's participation in local governance but also in ensuring that women's gendered interests are less likely to be forgotten in the process.

III.B.

## *zambia and zimbabwe: women and local governance in fragile states*

It is somewhat ironic that it was in Harare that the IULA adopted its worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government in 1998. The declaration appeals to national governments to “recognise national associations of local governments as important partners in the development, promotion and support of gender equality at the local level, and in the exchange of experiences at the international and national levels” (IULA 1998:1).

However, women have not fared well at local level in Zimbabwe. Although the country signed up to the SADC targets, there are 247 male councillors against 40 women. Organized women in Zimbabwe pushed for a quota for women in the 2003 elections. At party political level, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) both pledged their commitment to putting quotas in place for women representatives. Little has been done, however, to amend the Zimbabwean constitution or to legislate change in order to meet the SADC guidelines for a 30 per cent quota.

Following the 1997 SADC agreement on targets for women's representation, the Women in Parliament Support Unit (WPSU), a lobby group championing the cause of women's empowerment, wrote to all political parties, reminding them of the need to increase women's participation at all decision-making levels. The government response came from Oppah Muchinguri, the only female provincial governor out of a total of eight, who is also a ZANU-PF Women's League executive member and a member of parliament. She said that she was satisfied with government efforts to redress disparities in female representation in decision-making bodies, and at the local level pointed to the election of a woman mayor in the town of Mutare. There are 14 male mayors against this one woman, who has subsequently given up the role, explaining that this was because men were still resistant to women taking up posts in local government, making it very difficult for her to operate (Gwature 2002). Glory Chipadza, Chairperson of the Women in Local Government Forum (WLGf) confirmed this:

It's not easy I tell you. The fact that you have to be voted into a position and elections held makes it more challenging. At times you are called names, you are undressed by these men who do not want to see any women take up these posts, such that only a few aggressive women make it to the end (cited in Gwature 2002).

Participation in local government structures is more likely in urban than in rural areas. In Zimbabwe as in other parts of Southern Africa, rural women are subject to customary institutions that inhibit their access to and participation in decision-making bodies of any sort. Even in urban areas, however, conditions are difficult and democratic decentralization impossible.



A decade of hardship deriving from structural adjustment measures has seen a fall in real wages and an increase in domestic expenditure that has increased women's workload and rendered their household responsibilities more difficult (Kanji 1995). Since President Robert Mugabe and his ruling Zanu-PF party achieved a landslide victory in a controversial poll in March 2005, things have deteriorated further. In May 2005 residents of one of Harare's low-income suburbs took to the streets to demonstrate against the severe water shortage they were experiencing. Armed police beat up and forcibly dispersed the women and men who had gone without water for three days:

Police came in six vehicles and there was pandemonium as people fled in all directions. ... Harare is grappling severe water shortages because there is no foreign currency for spares for broken down water pumps and also to pay for water treatment chemicals (*Zim Online* 2005).

In this clash between state forces and residents, women were victims of police brutality. However, beyond direct confrontation, it is women who will bear the consequences of residents having been forced to drink sewage- and refuse-contaminated water from a nearby stream, consequences that strike at the heart of women's responsibility for family health and welfare. Moreover, in a vicious cycle, the ongoing political violence and repression in Zimbabwe serves to reduce women's participation in formal politics. Dryden Kunaka of the major opposition party, the MDC, stated that until this changed his party was not encouraging women to stand:

Everyone knows the kind of political atmosphere we are operating in. Unless there is a change that allows candidates to campaign freely, without fear of harassment and intimidation, we will continue to see less women being nominated as candidates for local councils (*Zim Online* 2005).

Zimbabwe represents an example of societal autonomy being denied by sheer force of repression. As women are excluded from both political participation and collective action at the local level, it remains for them to be represented by ruling-party women at national level who seem more adept as dancers and cheerleaders for Zanu-PF than as representatives of women's interests.

In Zambia since independence and democracy, however fragile, peace has been broadly characteristic of the country's post-colonial politics. The country has experienced economic decline, political tension, intermittent and prolonged droughts, and near famine in recent years. Despite or perhaps because of this grim backdrop, the participation of women in national politics has improved in recent years. The National Women's Lobby Group (NWLG), which helps campaign for women, has put this down in part to its support and training of potential women candidates, in part to their own campaigning, and in part to increased sensitivity on the part of the electorate to women's issues and women's rights (ZNWLG 2005). In the run up to 1996, for example, the NWLG in collaboration with NGOs trained women in campaigning, public speaking and communication skills, and the Zambian National Women's Lobby (ZNWL) supported 44 independent women candidates, although only one of those won a parliamentary seat. From the batch of women supported by political parties, 15 women won seats, bringing the total number of women in the Zambian parliament to 16, making up 10 per cent of the country's MPs (EISA 2001).

Although local authority elections have been held twice under the multiparty system that came into being in 1991, far less progress has been made in terms of women's representation at the local level. In the first round women accounted for barely 1 per cent of Zambia's 1,080 local councillors. There was a slight improvement after the second local elections, with 67 women out of 1,200 councillors, or 5.6 per cent of the seats. At present there are



95 women out of 1,300 councillors (Kamwi, 2004). One reason for the increase in the number of women in local government is that women's rights activists across the country campaigned for women candidates regardless of their political affiliation (ZNWLG 2005). In seeking to understand why women are still not well represented in local government despite intensive efforts on the part of organized women to see women in power, it is important to recognize the deep impact of structural adjustment policies that have had devastating effects on women's gender responsibilities in Zambia (Elson 1989; Moser 1996). The ravages of drought and the threat of famine have exacerbated these impacts more recently. When women's time is fully taken up in social reproduction and household livelihood strategies, little is left over for engagement in the public sphere. As in Zimbabwe, adjustment policies in Zambia have been informed by neoliberalism, although they have been equally detached from successful decentralization strategies. Efforts by donors to promote decentralization as part of public sector reform have been largely ineffective. A policy paper on decentralization was submitted to cabinet in 1999 but was not taken up, with ministers opting for a more gradual approach (van Donge 2003).

If time-poverty and impossible decisions over opportunity costs act to inhibit women from offering themselves as candidates, there is little to lure them on the side of local government itself. Elected local authorities have only rudimentary responsibilities and neither officials nor councillors can be guaranteed a salary at the end of the month (Beall 2003). If the alleviation of gender inequalities in Zambia is to depend on democratic decentralization, and the latter in turn on a strong state and robust democracy, then Zambian women have a long wait indeed. In a context where the state has been unable to create the conditions for basic political engagement and competition, their persistent and resilient efforts in the context of organized civil society are all the more remarkable. The prospects for engendered democratic decentralization, while a long way off, are more robust in a country where women's organizations have preserved some societal autonomy than in present-day Zimbabwe, where independence around women's rights remains largely elusive.

## IV.

## women, local governance and decentralization in south africa

Since South Africa's transition to a liberal democracy, its government's efforts to advance gender equity have been held up as a beacon of good practice across the world. However, the realities of women's experience in South Africa have been much more complex and paradoxical than the country's celebrated status suggests. This is particularly the case at the level of local government. Two factors stand out that are of particular relevance to the region. First, as elsewhere in Southern Africa, some of the problems women have faced at the local level relate to the

entrenchment of local relationships and power structures, particularly the power of traditional authorities, and above all in relation to land (Whitehead and Tzikata 2003), as well as the entrenchment of the role of those authorities in local government. A second factor relates to decentralization and its association with the impact of neoliberalism in Southern Africa. The patterns that have evolved in South Africa in this regard are not dissimilar from and mirror the impact of structural adjustment policies in the region. Both sets of issues operate against the achievement of a democratic decentralization process that will advance gender equity in a sustained way.

## IV.A.

### women's participation in local government

The end of apartheid changed the face of South African local government irrevocably. However, democratizing sub-national tiers of government was bound to be awkward, given South Africa's history as a country divided spatially along racial and ethnic lines, and the fact that these divisions were most obviously and keenly felt at

local level. At the time of the negotiated settlement in South Africa, the attention of all parties was firmly focused on control of the central state and the nature of provincial government, so that local government was at first neglected. Chapter 10 of the Interim Constitution dealt with local government and as Spitz (2000:183) has observed, "[the chapter's] most striking characteristic was its sparseness", doing little more than to create a loose framework for how local government was to operate. At the central level a fierce battle ensued between the forces of reaction that hoped for a federalist or consociational solution and the ANC, which wanted majority rule in a strong central state. It concentrated on securing national jurisdiction and rationalizing the multiple provincial and Bantustan administrations into a single South African system of sub-national government (Spitz 2000:123). Local government thus became a residual category, in relation to which the ANC made a number of initial concessions. For example, elements of consociational government, although denied nationally, were ensured at local level, meaning that significant decisions could not be taken without the consensus of minority residents (ibid: 183). Although this was later overturned, as Robinson has observed, local government became the site on which existing privilege was most robustly defended (Robinson 1996).

The Local Government Transition Act (Act 209 of 1993) defined a three-stage process for the restructuring of local government. First, elections were held for transitional local councils in 1995/6, allowing for some continuity of delivery until the second phase of local government reform was in place. Second, the Municipal Demarcation Board was established in 1998 to redraw municipal boundaries across the country. Although presented as a technical exercise, the demarcation process was also an intensely political one. Concerned in part with overcoming the legacies of apartheid planning and racially skewed resource distribution, it brought the ruling party into conflict with traditional leaders who saw the process as disregarding the boundaries of traditional authority areas in a process that reduced the number of municipalities from 843 to 284 (Goodenough 2002:40). The third stage of fully fledged democratic local government followed the local elections in 2000. By the time of the second local government elections in 2000, the autonomy of local government was ensured and could only be withdrawn at the risk of infuriating the thousands of ANC local councillors who had vested interests in protecting the powers of local government, a good proportion of whom were women.

Nevertheless, the setting up of structures and procedures proved to be complicated, given that during the apartheid era there had been no effective local government in South Africa outside the white areas. In urban areas the Black Local Authorities set up in the late 1970s were not sustainable, having lost legitimacy and virtually collapsed. In rural areas local government functions remained largely in the hands of traditional leaders who worked within and alongside apartheid structures, in a system not dissimilar to the indirect rule inherited from the colonial era. Traditional authorities had thus amassed considerable local power and they were keen not to see this dissipate under a new dispensation. The Local Government Transition Act provided little guidance on how local government councils in rural areas should be constituted, and it was left to provincial governments to decide on the form rural local government should take. The result was that traditional leaders were able to entrench their powers over a relatively lengthy period of transition, and this was to bode ill for women’s representation and influence over the longer term (Mbatha 2003:191).

During the early transitional period, government strategies in relation to women’s representation in politics were sorely neglectful of the local level (Robinson 1995:7–18). Feminist activists turning to electoral politics in order to advance the position of women inevitably focused on the national stage (Hassim 2002, 2003). Along with others involved in the negotiation process, women also woke up late to the strategic importance of the local level for advancing gender equity. Lastly, the movement of women towards securing the national project also left local leadership depleted. Indeed, it was only the repeated lobbying on the part of one small advocacy organization based in Cape Town, the Gender Advocacy Programme (GAP), that led the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) to take up women’s representation in local government. Following the poor showing of women in the 1995/6 elections, the GAP began organizing around local government representation (Van Donk 2000). In the run up to the 2000 local government elections, the CGE also embarked on a campaign to increase the representation of women in local government and to ensure that government became more responsive to women’s interests and demands. This led to an increase in the proportion of women councillors from just over 18 per cent to 28.2 per cent. One factor explaining this was that, by the time of the second local government elections, proportional representation (PR) was matched by a ward system on a 50–50 basis at local level (Zybrands 2001:208). The Municipal Structures Act of 1998, which included guidelines stating that “every party must seek to ensure that 50 per cent of the candidates on the party list are women and that women and men candidates are evenly distributed through the list”, served to change the gender balance of local councillors (Mbatha 2003:194). Legislation also provided that there should be equal representation of women and men on the ward committees, something fought for by the GAP and correctly interpreted as a significant victory at the time. While these were simply guidelines, the ANC nevertheless increased its quota of women to 46 per cent at local level (Pottie 2001:3).

Although the PR system works in favour of women, a mature democracy should be able to field elected women candidates at ward level as well. After all, being accountable to a generic constituency of women “out there” is different from being directly accountable to actual women constituents on the ground. Significantly, a number of the increased proportion of women local councillors were elected as ward candidates, showing that women political representatives are accepted at local level, although here performance across the country was patchy. The deficiencies of the ward system for women were particularly apparent in rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) where traditional authorities remain strong. Here, while 34.3 per cent of seats for women were achieved through the party list, women occupied only 12 per cent of ward seats (Pottie 2001:5). In this, the local level is in advance of other tiers of government in terms of ensuring women’s real political presence. The ward committees are also proving to be a key route for civil society participation, alongside considerable increases in women’s representation. A critical question is the extent to which this translates into a system of engendered democratic decentralization in which gender interests are addressed.

## IV.B.

## *weak and strong decentralization in south africa*

In 1998 the Local Government White Paper advanced the concept of “developmental local government” and determined that municipalities pursue integrated development planning in a context of intersectoral partnerships that required the active involvement of communities, alongside other vested interest groups, through both public and private investment.

From the outset the ANC saw developmental local government as a vehicle for national development. Local government was given constitutional protection and fiscal capability, being responsible for raising 90 per cent of its own revenue. Local governments in South Africa have a number of sources of finance, the main ones being rates on property and surcharges on fees for services provided by or on behalf of the municipality. Other sources of revenue are allowed, but explicitly exclude income tax, value-added tax, general sales tax and customs duties. Although local government is responsible for service delivery, however, this is also the responsibility of both provincial and local governments, with local government as the junior partner in the intergovernmental fiscal system (Bahl and Smoke 2003:8). The capacities of local authorities vary considerably. At one end of the spectrum the metropolitan municipalities have achieved a level of financial autonomy, while small rural councils have scant revenue raising-capacity and are heavily dependent on national government transfers through a system known as the “equitable share”.

The national government in South Africa became increasingly convinced of the managerial potential of decentralization. This gave rise to a plethora of technocratic procedures that were institutionalized without sustained attention being paid to local level representation and participation. Moreover, as McDonald and Pape (2002:5) have observed, decentralization was accompanied by cutbacks in central government allocations to local authorities, leaving them vulnerable to market forces. The requirement for local authorities to raise their own revenue must be set against the view that financial autonomy on the part of local government is an indicator of strong or democratic decentralization, particularly in the context of highly unequal societies such as South Africa. If developmental local government simply means central government shifting responsibility for service delivery to the local level through a series of unfunded mandates, decentralization in South Africa has to be characterized as managerial or weak. Following the April 2004 national elections, the government signalled a shift towards

increased spending to benefit the poor, as by then the macro-economy had been stabilized. However, limited resources and the expanded responsibilities of local government for service delivery forced them to recover their costs through service charges. The impact on many poor urban residents has been devastating. Cut-offs have been employed both in respect of individual households that cannot afford services and as a more widespread strategy to punish whole communities for non-payment. Under such circumstances, decentralization strategies are potentially dangerous not only to local governments, with their constitutional responsibility for the social and economic development of communities, but also to communities and citizens.

Local authorities are also constitutionally committed to popular participation, and participatory planning is now legally inscribed in the legislative code of local development in South Africa. Local governments are required to undertake medium-term integrated development plans (IDPs) linked to municipal responsibilities and budgets, which should reflect the priorities identified by communities in gender-aware ways. There have been problems related to implementation. For example, long-standing residents often exclude newcomers to an area and, despite the initial energy shown, both officials and community representatives have become frustrated with what is a time-consuming exercise (Beall et al. 2002:129). A further difficulty in the IDP process is that municipalities have found it difficult to incorporate the multiple and often contradictory views that citizens express. This has been particularly problematic for women, as early experiences show that gender issues tend to get lost when diverse priorities are aggregated into a single plan. Women need effective organization at the local level if this is to be countered.

IV.C.

## *women's organization at the local level*

Women's organization and advocacy in relation to local government in South Africa have exhibited an abiding concern with housing, infrastructure and services (Van Donk 2002). By continuing to press for affordable housing, water supplies, sanitation and electricity services, women have been responsible for inserting a distributive agenda

into local politics. Between 1994 and 2003 nearly two million housing subsidies were approved, and almost half a million houses built in the apartheid era were transferred to their occupants through a discount benefit scheme. Almost half of all subsidies approved were granted to women (RSA 2003:25). Some local authorities have met the challenges of poverty reduction and service delivery better than others, however, and there are significant differences between rural and urban areas, as well as across different services. Indeed, in its review of the first ten years of democracy the South African Government had to admit that although "housing, land redistribution and other services ... show significant improvements in gender bias ... the majority still go to male-headed households" (RSA 2003:83).

The Anti-Privatization Forum has been active in engaging local government over services. Its campaigns have included Operation Khanyisa, whereby disconnected electricity supplies are illegally reconnected, and Operation Vulamanzi, which involved the breaking of prepaid water meters so as to allow water to flow freely. The Forum does not advocate illegal activities or non-payment for services, but recognizes them as an inevitable consequence of customers simply being unable to afford them. The implications of inadequate services for women are considerable. When a household's services are cut off because of non-payment, it is often the women of the

household who have to cope with the consequences, and service interruptions inevitably impact on their role in social reproduction. It is not surprising, therefore, that women form the bulk of the membership of the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF). However, although from late 2002 the APF saw its women members coming together as women around gender related issues, this was not sustained. According to one Forum activist this was because “we have been caught up in other things as an organization, and as activists have been spread very thinly” (Melanie Samson, interview, April 2004). Others have argued that the post-1994 social movements in South Africa have tended to use women and have “very often relied on the mobilization of women on the basis of their practical needs—for example, for electricity, land and housing—but have rarely linked these to issues of the pernicious gender division of labour” (Hassim 2004b:25). During the anti-apartheid struggle there was hope that women’s organization would achieve gains for women, but this is no longer so much the case. As Hassim (2004b:16) has observed, “One of the most notable changes in the landscape of the women’s movement in the post-1994 period was the fragmentation and stratification of women’s organizations in civil society”.

Mosoetsa’s (2005) micro-level work suggests nevertheless that women continue to be organized in communities and that they are animated by issues related to service delivery. However, she also paints a bleak picture of poverty and unemployment driving people into the confines of the home, where they rely only on family support and reciprocity within the confines of small and trusted social networks in preference to the more uncertain prospects of collective action. Nevertheless, she points to important sites of association such as church groups, savings clubs and burial societies, and argues that these have helped women in the face of what she characterizes as a “crisis of representation”. She identifies this crisis as significant both in the political sphere, as evidenced by mistrust of political parties, and in relation to civil society organizations, seen for example in disappointment with trade unions that are perceived to have let people down in the face of factory closures, unemployment and poverty. Mosoetsa observes a stirring among women in response to inadequate service delivery and affordability issues related to water supplies and electricity, which she suggests would not have been possible without an ongoing associational life. For example, in the township where she conducted her research a new alliance was formed in 2000 in response to the installation of water meters, leading to community marches and disconnections when the metropolitan council demanded payments that the local people could not afford. For Mosoetsa, this engagement with metropolitan government, largely on the part of women, points to a revitalization of women’s organization and a sign of their emerging citizenship.

## IV.D.

## *women holding local government to account*

One of the arenas through which women have sought to hold government to account has been through a “watch-dog” role in relation to revenue and expenditure. Inspired by the experience of women in Australia, South Africa was one of the first countries to take gender budgeting seriously, and the Women’s Budget Initiative (WBI) was

established in the 1990s (Budlender 2001). Gender-responsive budgets (GRBs) are mechanisms by which governments, in dialogue with other sectors, can integrate gender analysis into public expenditure policies and budgets. This does not imply a separate budget for women, but rather the political will to disaggregate expenditure according to its differential impact on women and men (Commonwealth Secretariat 2001:1). In



South Africa as elsewhere, gender analysis of local government budgets is not as advanced as efforts at the national level. Women organizing around local government issues have teamed up with the WBI (Budlender 1999b), but as Hassim (2004b:30) has pointed out:

The project had real possibilities to raise fundamental questions about spending priorities and to highlight the ways in which women were benefiting (or not) from particular policy approaches. However, within a few years the Ministry of Finance, which had initially embraced the Women's Budget Initiative, downgraded the project and it is now virtually moribund at the national level.

Hassim is swift to point out that this conclusion should not be read as meaning that engaging the state is misguided, but rather that it is necessary to consider *how* the state should be engaged and how to build a grassroots women's movement that is sufficiently mobilized to support a critical engagement with the state. In the meantime she stresses the importance of consolidating the political gains made for women at the national level.

If this strategy is to be paralleled at the local level then the issue of local taxation is critical, not least because as payers of rates and service charges women have a right to make demands on local governments and to hold them accountable. Some progress has been made in South Africa towards raising awareness about the impact of local government revenue and expenditure on women through informing women about local government expenditures and revenues (Coopoo 2000). Indeed, the focus on local government budgets has had an interesting impact on gender budgeting itself, shifting the bias from expenditure towards greater concentration on how revenue is raised. Budlender (1999a:21) has argued that not only are the revenue sources of local government—which include intergovernmental transfers, property taxes, licence fees, tariffs for services and user charges—more diverse than for national or provincial government, but they can have a particularly adverse affect on women. This is the case, for example, with user charges, which often become women's responsibility within households. Coopoo (2000) notes in the case of South African local government that user charges account for over half of operating budget income, although as with all sources of revenue there are enormous differences between municipalities. If local authorities are primarily dependent on cost recovery as a revenue source, then problems are likely to get worse rather than better for low-income women.

There are other areas of local revenue collection that particularly affect low-income women. Coopoo (2000) highlights the range of local taxes that poor women and men have to pay in rural areas; in some parts of KwaZulu-Natal these include a compulsory levy paid to the king, often without people understanding why or ever seeing any benefit. In urban areas there are licences and site fees for street traders. Writing about women street traders in Durban, Skinner (1999) demonstrates that although such fees are low in absolute terms, they consume a significant proportion of most traders' incomes. In cities women are more likely to be seen as taxpayers and to see themselves as such. Here the influence of the GAP and the WBI has been important. In rural areas the challenge is far greater. Customary law and traditional practice have not seen women as taxpayers in their own right, and efforts on behalf of or by women to ensure that revenue streams are collected and spent in gender equitable ways prove more difficult.

In evaluating whether decentralization in South Africa is democratic and good for women, the evidence is mixed. The main vehicle for participation is through ward committees, and here women's participation and representation have increased, particularly in urban areas. Through these committees and the IDPs, women can and do influence planning outcomes in ways that speak to their gender interests (Beall and Todes 2004a). This is not

to suggest that women have gained full social autonomy. On the contrary, party politics often intersect the agendas of women's local level organizations (Beall and Todes 2004b). Nevertheless, urban women have had successes at the local level, although these successes would not have been possible without enabling legislation and policies emanating from the efforts of women at the national level. Such evidence confirms that democratic decentralization is most likely to work in the context of a strong central state and robust intergovernmental co-ordination. That said, the reach of central government in South Africa is limited, particularly in remote rural areas and parts of the country where the ANC does not hold power. It is important, therefore, to consider in more detail the experience of rural decentralization and to draw out the implications for women.

## IV.E.

## *constraints on gender equity in local governance*

Important in understanding rural local government is that the institutional reach of the post-apartheid state was limited by the legacy of apartheid policies. In its recent publication *Towards a Ten Year Review*, the South African Government stated that “the needs of local government are most critical, with the majority of municipalities not having the capacity ... to perform their delivery functions” (RSA 2003:108). This points to the importance of traditional authorities at the local level. Administratively they are seen as indispensable to developmental local government in the rural areas, because under apartheid rural local government functions in African areas lay largely in the hands of traditional leaders. Few alternatives are yet in place and traditional authorities are still relied upon to provide local government on the cheap. Politically their perceived importance for delivering rural constituencies to the ANC has made the party reluctant to alienate them. Central government has shied away from taking on the chiefs, who have amassed for themselves considerable local power. They have been resilient in their opposition to any local government reforms that threaten their influence. Representatives of chieftaincies have shown themselves prepared to accept nothing short of constitutional protection of their customary rights and responsibilities. However, while President Thabo Mbeki did not give into their demand for 50 per cent representation on elected local councils, he did increase their participation from 10 to 20 per cent. By placating traditional leaders in this way, he stood prepared to put local democracy at risk by increasing the influence of hereditary rather than elected leaders. Moreover, this has created tensions between South Africa's constitutional commitment towards gender equity and the discrimination against women implied by the elevated status of traditional leaders in local government (Beall 2004).

Women and traditional leaders first came into conflict during the constitution-making period when some of the chiefs opposed the principle of gender equity. In the event the constitution validated both gender equality and cultural autonomy, “while placing equality as the ‘trump’ criterion in cases where both came into conflict” (Hassim 2004a:16). However, while women's organizations have continued to challenge chieftaincy, they are often urban-based. Such opposition is more difficult for rural women who are customarily denied participation in traditional male-dominated decision-making structures and processes. Women's well-being also rests with traditional leaders in very material ways. Customary law, which was upheld under apartheid, discriminates against women, who could not own land or property in their own right and who lost any such rights on the death of their husbands. This was based on a principle of male primogeniture that required that property be passed on to the nearest male relative. The Supreme Court of Appeal upheld this principle as recently as 2000 even though



under the new Constitution principles of gender equity are supposed to prevail over the exercise of customary law. Traditional authorities also control access to communal land, to which women have only restricted access, with most traditional leaders continuing to refuse to allocate land to women (Hassim 2004a).

The influence of traditional leaders has most recently been seen in the passing of the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (TLGFA) in 2004. This Act validates the role of chieftaincy in local government and clarifies the position of traditional councils, which must now operate within and alongside other local government structures. Section Three of the Act states that “traditional communities” must establish these councils, which in turn must comprise “traditional leaders and members of the traditional community selected by the principal traditional leader concerned in terms of custom”. Where the old tribal authorities exist, established under the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, they will simply be converted into traditional councils. This significantly entrenches the authority of traditional leaders and means in effect that legislation introduced in the twenty-first century will give perpetual life to a system of “indirect rule” dating back to the colonial era (Walker 2003).

The involvement of traditional authorities in developmental local government constitutes an administrative approach to decentralization, albeit one that has the added advantage of not alienating potential political opponents. For example, new government-sponsored traditional development centres are being added to existing traditional councils and tribal courts; they are dubbed “traditional” because they are set up under the aegis of local chieftaincies in co-ordination with traditional structures of governance. Some of these are already under way and are functioning as one-stop shops, serving as pension payout points, satellite offices for the Department of Home Affairs, sites for mobile clinics, providers of HIV/AIDS awareness services and small business development advice. At the launch of the Mpumuza Traditional Development Centre in KwaZulu-Natal, the Provincial Traditional Affairs Member of the Executive Committee *Inkosi* Nyanga Ngubane said that the traditional development centres represented a shift in the way traditional communities related to local government and a transformation of local governance structures so that they were “more accessible to a greater number of people in the traditional authority areas” (Khumalo 2003).

While taking information, communication and services to people in deep rural areas is undoubtedly a good thing and of potential benefit to women, it is ironic that primarily male non-elected appointees dominate the level of government closest to the people. Indeed, the elevation of hereditary chieftainship to a privileged and protected position within local governance seriously compromises rural women’s access to and influence on local government. In the name of modernizing if not democratizing traditional structures, the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 3(2)(b) of 2004 insists that one third of the “traditional community” must be women, and that of this third, 25 per cent must be elected by the community. However, this is in a context where 40 per cent of council members are elected, with the remaining 60 per cent comprising traditional leaders and members of the traditional community selected by elders in accordance with custom. The Act states that all traditional councils must comply within the space of four years, but there are no clear provisions or safeguards as to how women should be elected and no sanctions for failure to do so.

Nowhere has government failed women more than in relation to land and women’s rights over its allocation and use. Initially it was proposed that land remain a national government competence that was not devolved to local government, although legislation would cater for a variety of different forms of land and property rights. Traditional leaders ferociously opposed this and the proposed legislation was shelved until after the 1999 elections; the new Minister of Land Affairs, Thoko Didiza, subsequently announced the introduction of a land rights bill in April 2001. The bill emphasized communities rather than individuals and reinforced the power of traditional

leaders. The Communal Land Rights Act that was finally passed in late 2003 stated that land administration functions and powers—including the power to own, administer, allocate and register land rights—must be performed by “traditional councils” where they exist (Section 22(2)). The Communal Land Rights Act needs to be viewed in conjunction with the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, which went through parliament at the same time, immediately preceding the April 2004 national elections. Clearly, winning over traditional leaders was perceived as a greater political imperative than upholding the liberal democratic principles of the Constitution.

This legislation was dogged by controversy and was widely opposed, not least by women’s organizations. Given the inevitable negative impact on women of these two Acts in combination, there may be some weight to the argument that the joint effect of the bills is anti-constitutional. Despite speculation that women’s organizations may take the government to the Constitutional Court on this issue, this has not yet happened. Rural women were consulted by organizations involved in land issues, such as the Programme for Land and Agricultural Studies, and their views and position were represented; the Commission on Gender Equality also highlighted women’s concerns. However, rural women have not been well organized beyond the community level. In terms of civil society organizations, the Rural Women’s Movement historically helped ensure that distributive issues such as access to and control over land have been kept at the forefront of rural women’s political agenda, for example in relation to the constitution-making process. However, as Hassim (2004a) has argued, by the time the two bills were introduced, the Rural Women’s Movement was a virtually defunct organization.

The situation of rural women stands in stark contrast to the scenario of local government envisaged by the GAP (GAP 1997:24) in its commentary on the White Paper on Local Government:

Local Government is the level of government closest to the people. It has particular importance for women, because of its responsibility for the delivery of goods and services that impact directly on the necessities of social reproduction, a sphere in which women have disproportionate responsibility. Its direct interface with the community puts Local Government in a unique position to understand the contextual dynamics that shape and regulate women’s lives. Through its location Local Government has the potential to contribute to greater gender equity.

Yet the opposite has happened. To the insult of a desultory performance in ensuring rural women’s representation in local government has been added the injury of reducing their influence on the institutions that stand between them and access to critical resources such as land. Women’s access to resources remains elusive, and is impeded above all by that level of government that is supposed to offer them the greatest opportunity for participation and representation.

V.

## conclusion

In South Africa, efforts to advance gender equity were made at the same time as the thrust of neo-liberal policies was deepening. Decentralization has taken a managerial form and the extension of services to historically disadvantaged populations has come with a price tag in the form of cost recovery. Women in particular felt the impact of these policies acutely, in ways not dissimilar from the

impact on women of structural adjustment policies in Zambia and Zimbabwe. In South Africa issues of access and affordability have clearly exercised women, and their involvement in social movements opposed to privatization and cost recovery in service delivery is clear testimony to this. For an engendered democratic decentralization to emerge and take hold, such organizations need to represent women's demands and promote gender justice. In South Africa much also depends on whether central government and the ANC, with its resounding majority following the 2004 national elections, remains open to challenge from civil society and steadfast in the face of efforts to erode the hard-won victories for women in the context of South Africa's liberal democracy. However, as yet these preconditions appear a long way off, and Manor's (1999:97) assessment in relation to India that decentralization offers "only modest encouragement" to women appears as much the case for South Africa as well. As such, decentralization remains a real litmus test of South Africa's ability to engender its new democracy.

To what extent can this be compensated for by women's involvement in the formal structures of local government? Across Southern Africa apart from Namibia, it is interesting that women do not have as secure a footing in local government structures as in other tiers of government. In South Africa it could be argued that, although the movement of a substantial number of women's leaders into national and provincial government since 1994 has left a vacuum at local level, that movement has been a necessary if not sufficient condition for advancing gender equity. There have certainly been considerable pay-offs from this participation in terms of enabling legislation and policies. The same might be argued for some other Southern African countries, such as Mozambique. However, in much of the region there is insufficient congruence between higher and lower spheres of government. Effective intragovernmental interaction between different tiers of government is a critical predetermining factor for strong decentralization. This is limited or completely absent in Southern Africa's more fragile states. In the stronger polities such as Mozambique and South Africa it is more evident but still wanting, particularly in relation to an integrated approach to women's political participation and gender equity in policy. The prospects for women's gains in the form of constitutional and policy commitments at national level becoming embedded at local level and extended through local government are frankly remote, even in South Africa. This is in part because the prospects for societal autonomy in the form of an autonomous women's movement remain slim. Another cause is that the local state has been unable to protect itself from penetration by social institutions linked to traditional authority.

Local government is the tier of government closest to civil society, and as such really does hold opportunities for locally organized women. However, local state–society relations can also lead to ambiguous outcomes, with access to resources and decision-making being retained by existing power holders at the expense of the advancement of women's participation. In this regard, South Africa is little different from other countries in Southern Africa. In South Africa it is clear that the infusion of formal organizations of local government with the customary practices peddled by traditional authorities has had a negative impact on women's prospects for democracy. Worse, these informal institutions appear to become increasingly entrenched in the formal organization of local government and in law. This stands to undermine the hard-won rights of women as citizens achieved at the level of national legislation. Hence the extent to which local government can benefit women is ultimately limited by

the fact that it is so frequently deeply embedded in asymmetrical social relations and informal institutions, whether they be the patron–client relations described here in relation to Angola, the repressive responses of state officials described in the case of Zimbabwe, or the hereditary rule of traditional authorities in much of Southern Africa and profiled here in the discussion of South Africa. The fact of too much society in the local state helps explain why local governance rarely proves to be a magic bullet for women’s participation in local politics. The fact of too little societal autonomy for women’s organizations helps explain why women find this so difficult to challenge.

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