



Photo: Arya Rajendran, Mayor of Trivandrum (2020-2025), Kerala, India

POLICY BRIEF

Multilevel Governance and Gender: Decentralization and Local Governance in a Gendered World

Decentralization and multilevel governance are widely promoted as pathways toward more inclusive, responsive, and accountable public sectors. By bringing decision-making closer to communities, decentralization is expected to improve service delivery, strengthen participation, and enhance the legitimacy of public institutions. These expectations rest on the premise that local governments are better positioned to understand local conditions and respond to people's needs.

Yet this premise overlooks a critical reality: governance systems operate within deeply gendered social, economic, and political contexts. Inequalities in power, access to resources, agency, rights, and opportunity shape how individuals engage with the state and how public institutions function in practice. When decentralization reforms fail to account for these realities, they risk reproducing or amplifying existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

This policy brief examines the intersection between gender and multilevel governance. It argues that decentralization cannot be inclusive or effective unless it explicitly addresses gendered constraints and opportunities. Gender equality is not a sectoral concern to be addressed through isolated programs; it is a core governance issue that cuts across political representation, public administration, fiscal systems, and local service delivery.

Living in a gendered world challenges core assumptions of inclusive and effective multilevel governance

Inclusive and effective multilevel governance is often premised on the assumption that local governments, by virtue of their proximity to citizens, are inherently more responsive to people's needs. In practice, however, the persistence of gendered norms and institutions fundamentally shapes how governance systems function at all levels.

Deeply embedded social norms and unequal divisions of paid and unpaid labor between men and women—though varying in form and intensity across countries around the world—create systematic imbalances in economic power and political voice. These imbalances influence who participates in public decision-making, whose preferences are reflected in policy choices, and how public resources are allocated.

For many policymakers and practitioners—particularly those who have not personally experienced these constraints—the effects of gendered systems may appear abstract. In fact, the terminology used to describe these dynamics—such as references to “patriarchy”—may be perceived as politically charged or even triggering by some. Yet, the underlying realities are widely documented and consequential. For billions of women, the consequences are immediate and tangible. Disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work and women's relative lack of social capital—such as access to influential networks and connections—can limit women's participation in labor markets, constrain mobility, and reduce the time and energy available for civic and political engagement. These constraints often translate into lower incomes, weaker social protection, more limited access to public services, and heightened exposure to poverty.

From a governance perspective, such inequalities distort collective decision-making. When large segments of the population face systematic barriers to participation, public institutions cannot accurately aggregate societal preferences. Policies may appear technically sound yet fail to reflect lived realities, undermining the legitimacy, effectiveness, and equity of public sector systems.

If multilevel governance systems and decentralization reforms are to achieve their stated objectives by contributing to more inclusive and equitable processes and outcomes, the public sector governance community should:

- Recognize the gendered nature of economic opportunity
- Acknowledge that gender shapes political representation and voice at all government levels, and proactively support women's participation in political leadership and local decision-making

- Address gendered dynamics within public administration, including recruitment, retention, promotion, and workplace culture
- Ensure gender-responsive prioritization and outcomes in local public service delivery, providing for women’s unique needs where appropriate
- Leverage gender-responsive budgeting at the local level as needed to align resources with women’s priorities, needs, and gender gaps
- Recognize the unique role of local actors in preventing and responding to gender-based violence and supporting women in crisis situations
- Co-design local policies, services, and products with women and women’s organizations, ensuring they reflect diverse lived experiences, care responsibilities, safety concerns, and access barriers

Gendered inequalities have real economic and social consequences

The gendered nature of economic opportunity is well documented across regions and income levels. Persistent imbalances in paid and unpaid work contribute to enduring wage gaps between men and women, with women bearing a disproportionate share of unpaid care work limiting entry into the labor market. Working women face a double burden as they balance income-generating activities with full responsibility for childcare, care for the elderly and domestic duties. Wage inequalities also become particularly pronounced in informal economic activities, such as local markets and small-scale trade, where women are overrepresented and earn significantly less than men. Even where formal gender equality policies exist, unequal care responsibilities and the precarious nature of informal work—typically regulated and taxed by local governments—continue to limit women’s labor force participation and earnings.

These outcomes are not merely social challenges; they reflect governance failures. Policy choices related to childcare provision, social protection, labor regulation, and local service delivery are often made without adequately accounting for gendered constraints. When multilevel governance systems overlook these realities, they reinforce inequality rather than mitigate it.

Gender shapes local political representation and voice

Gendered power dynamics are particularly evident in political representation at the local level. Across governance systems, women remain significantly underrepresented in local elected office and are even less visible in leadership roles within council committees where key policy and budget decisions are made. Even in relatively progressive societies, leadership positions in municipalities, counties, and regions are disproportionately held by men.

In the United States, for example, women occupy only a small share of county-level leadership roles. Similar patterns persist globally, including in countries with strong national commitments to gender equality. Women’s participation is also constrained in public participation processes that are not designed around local gender norms and time constraints. In many communities, norms limit women’s ability to speak in public forums, and unpaid care responsibilities leave them little time to attend meetings or consultations. As a result of these intersecting barriers—low representation in elected positions and committee leadership, limited influence within political parties, and constrained participation in public forums—local policies, plans, and laws are rarely designed with women’s priorities and lived experiences at their core. While women may formally have the right to vote and stand for office, unequal access to resources, time, political networks, and party support limits their ability to translate voice into power, and the design of representation systems (including the use of gender quotas and proportional representation) further shapes whose interests are substantively reflected in local decision-making.

This imbalance matters because local governments are responsible for services that disproportionately affect women and girls, including water and sanitation, primary health care, transport, social services, and community safety. When women are underrepresented or excluded from decision-making spaces, these services risk being designed and delivered without adequate consideration of their needs.

Gendered dynamics within local public administration

Beyond elected office, gender inequality also shapes the composition and culture of local public administrations. Women are often underrepresented in senior administrative and technical roles, particularly in sectors such as infrastructure, finance, and urban planning.

The consequences of gender disparities in administration also become evident in the ways local laws and regulations are enforced: weak accountability and discretionary power among local enforcement officers can create space for harassment, extortion, and sexual and gender-based violence against women—especially against informal traders in markets and women engaged in cross-border trade, as observed in countries such as Kenya and Ghana.

Where women are present in public administration, they may face barriers to promotion, limited access to professional development, and workplace cultures that undervalue or limit their contributions, including through exposure to sexual and gender-based harassment and violence that further undermines their safety, wellbeing, and capacity to advance.

These dynamics directly affect institutional performance. Diverse administrative teams are better positioned to identify service gaps, engage communities, and design inclusive

policies. Conversely, administrations that reflect narrow social perspectives are more likely to reproduce existing biases in policy design and implementation. Strengthening gender equality within local public administration is therefore not only a matter of fairness; it is essential to improving the quality and responsiveness of local governance in a gendered world.

Gendered priorities and outcomes in local public service delivery

The cumulative effects of unequal agency, economic power, and representation are most visible in local service delivery outcomes. Public services are not gender-neutral. Although form and intensity may vary across contexts, women and men interact differently with health systems, water and sanitation, education services, transport networks, housing markets, and public spaces. Yet because gendered needs are routinely overlooked in local planning and budgeting, gender-specific services—such as childcare and eldercare, support for persons with disabilities, maternal and reproductive health services, as well as prevention and response to gender-based violence—are rarely prioritized or adequately funded.

When local governments fail to recognize these differences, services may unintentionally exclude or disadvantage women and girls. Inadequate street lighting, unsafe public transport, limited childcare options, and restricted access to reproductive health services all constrain women’s participation in economic and civic life.

Gender-responsive public service delivery looks different in different sectors

Public education. Gender-responsive education addresses barriers such as school safety, menstrual hygiene, sanitation, forced marriage, and care responsibilities that disproportionately affect girls’ attendance and completion. Local governments play a critical role in managing facilities and engaging communities.

Public health services. Women’s health needs—including reproductive and maternal care—require localized planning and delivery. Distance, cost, and service availability often affect women more acutely, particularly in rural and low-income areas.

Public transportation. Transport systems shape access to jobs, services, and public spaces. Unsafe or unreliable transport disproportionately limits women’s mobility, especially for those balancing paid and unpaid work.

Water and sanitation. Access to affordable and safe water and sanitation directly affects women’s time use, health, and dignity. Local infrastructure decisions significantly influence unpaid care burdens and safety risks.

Public safety and justice. Local policing, lighting, community safety initiatives, and access to justice shape women’s exposure to violence and willingness to engage in public life.

Livelihoods and economic empowerment. Local economic development strategies—such as market infrastructure, business licensing, skills programs, and childcare provision—can either enable or constrain women’s economic participation.

Gender-responsive budgeting at the local level

Public sector budgets—at all levels—reflect the priorities of those with voice. Given women’s underrepresentation in political leadership and senior public administration, budgets often fail to adequately reflect women’s priorities. Gender-responsive budgeting at all levels—including the local level—offers a practical governance tool to address this imbalance.

Gender-responsive budgeting is frequently misunderstood as earmarking funds for women. In reality, it involves systematically analyzing how budget decisions affect different groups and adjusting policies, programs, and allocations to promote equitable outcomes. It focuses on how public resources are used, not simply on who receives them. When applied effectively, gender-responsive budgeting can enhance transparency, accountability, and the responsiveness of decentralized fiscal systems.

Local governments and gender-based violence

Local governments play a critical role in preventing and responding to gender-based violence (GBV). While national governments typically define legal frameworks, it is often left to local authorities and civil society to deliver many frontline services, including shelters, social services, policing, community outreach, and public awareness initiatives.

Effective responses to gender-based violence require coordination across sectors and levels of government. Decentralized systems that provide local governments with clear mandates, adequate resources, and discretion are better equipped to tailor interventions to local contexts. Overly centralized systems, by contrast, often struggle to gain trust and respond to localized patterns of risk and vulnerability.

Integrating gender-based violence prevention into local governance strategies strengthens the social contract by signaling that public institutions are responsive to lived experiences and committed to protecting vulnerable populations.

Gender, decentralization, and crisis contexts

The gendered dimensions of governance become particularly visible during crises, including economic shocks, climate-related disasters, conflict, and public health emergencies. Crises often intensify unpaid care burdens, increase exposure to violence, and disrupt access to essential services. In many crisis contexts (for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic), funding for social sector services, gender equity work, and services that primarily benefit women and girls is among the first to be cut or reallocated when fiscal pressures mount, forcing women’s organizations and GBV programs to scale back or close.

just as needs are rising. At the same time, local government staff and systems may be redirected toward national crisis response, weakening frontline capacity for gender-responsive service delivery and community support.

Local governments are typically first responders, yet they frequently lack the authority or resources needed to act effectively. Strengthening multilevel governance systems with a gender lens enhances resilience by enabling localized, context-sensitive responses that account for differentiated impacts.

Public sector responses to gender equity and women’s empowerment tend to be highly centralized

Public sector efforts to advance gender equity and women’s empowerment are often highly centralized. National strategies, ministries, and programs dominate policy design and resource allocation, while local governments are left with limited discretion or capacity to implement context-sensitive solutions.

This centralization can result in elite capture of resources, weak or fragmented implementation, and poor alignment with local needs. Gender policies and strategies designed far from communities may fail to address practical constraints related to care work, mobility, safety, or service access. Partnering with local officials and local civil society organizations—while maintaining national standards and accountability—can help ensure that gender equity interventions reach those they are intended to serve.

Conclusion: Gender equality as a multilevel and local governance imperative

Gender inequality is not a peripheral concern in decentralization and multilevel governance: it is central to their effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability. Governance systems that fail to account for gendered realities cannot deliver truly inclusive collective decision-making, equitable service delivery, or credible social contracts. Without deliberate attention to gender, decentralization risks reproducing or amplifying existing power imbalances rather than transforming them.

For policymakers, governance practitioners, and development partners at all levels, integrating gender perspectives into multilevel governance reforms is therefore both a normative obligation and a practical necessity. Empowering local governments—while ensuring that women have voice, agency, and representation within political institutions, public administration, and fiscal systems—offers one of the most effective pathways toward inclusive, responsive, and resilient public sectors.

At the same time, while civil society organizations play a critical role in advocating for women’s rights, promoting voice, and encouraging gender-responsive service provision, civil society intervention is not a substitute for the structural functions of government. Achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment at scale ultimately requires the active engagement of local governance actors with the authority, resources, and mandate to shape public policy, allocate public resources, and deliver essential services—functions that civil society alone cannot perform.

In a gendered world, decentralization and multilevel governance can either entrench inequality or help dismantle it. The difference lies in whether governance systems at all levels are intentionally designed and implemented to recognize gendered constraints, redistribute power, and translate women’s rights into lived realities at the level closest to the people.

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The Local Public Sector Alliance (LPSA) is a global professional network of advocates for inclusive and efficient decentralization, localization, and multilevel governance. More information:
www.decentralization.net