

Political Cleaners: How Women are the New Anti-Corruption Force. Does the Evidence Wash?

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There is a myth-in-the-making at the moment: that women tend to be less corrupt than men. For instance, the World Bank's most important recent policy statement on gender equality, 'Engendering Development', asserts a strong relationship between relatively high levels of female involvement in public life and low levels of government corruption. The report concludes that this finding lends 'additional support for having more women in politics and in the labor force – since they could be an effective force for good government and business trust' (World Bank, *Engendering Development*, 2001:96). Thus the challenge of increasing the numbers of women in public life, long defended by feminists as a matter of human rights and democratic justice, can now be seen to have an efficiency payoff – more women in power may have the effect of reducing corruption – though as we shall see, the causal relationship between numbers of women in the public arena and the extent or type of corrupt activity is not very clear. Like any instrumentalist argument, the 'women are less corrupt than men' justification for bringing women into politics and public institutions not just vulnerable to exposure as a myth; it puts women's engagement in the public arena on the wrong foot. Women are seen as instruments to achieve a broader development goal, not welcomed to public office as a matter of their democratic and employment rights. The new stress on women's female gender as a useful instrument for good governance is also a good example of

the dangers of using the notion of ‘women’ as a single category in social analysis and in development policy. Critical social differences of interest between women disappear before the presumed fact of the probity and virtues inherent to their gender. But politics is the very worst place to ignore differences between women. Arrangements for the inclusion of women in politics that are not sensitive to differences of race, class, and ethnicity between women will see elite women capturing public office.¹

This paper explores the emergence of the myth of women’s lesser propensity than men to engage in corrupt activity. I show that the notion that women are less corrupt than men, more likely to behave with probity and integrity, is ironically the reverse of a myth that has kept them *out* of the public realm for centuries. That earlier myth justified women’s exclusion from politics and public administration on the grounds that their rootedness in the affective world of the family left them ill-equipped for rational public debate using principles of impartiality and universality. Next, I examine the evidence for the new image of women as ‘political cleaners’. I will show that it is mainly based upon *assumptions* about women’s inherent probity made by a range of actors, including women themselves. In the next sections of the paper I go on to argue that gender does indeed shape *opportunities* for corruption. But to say this is different from the new myth that women’s gender and gendered socialization to determine their *reactions* to corruption. I suggest that we can understand these gendered opportunities by examining how women are recruited into and treated within key institutions that shape public life: political parties and state bureaucracies. I use examples from South Asia to illustrate this. What matters is not the ‘simple access’ (Jonasdottir, 1988) of women to power and public life. What matters is the *means* of their access (have women come through the women’s movement or through democratic party processes that connect them to a social base pressing for equity?) and the nature of the institutions in which they function (how do these institutions hold public actors to account? To what constituencies do public actors answer? How are power relations in the institution organized, challenged, changed?). I conclude by asking whether it is useful to analyze problems of governance -- or accountability failures – from a gender perspective. This is a question about what governments can do for women, as opposed to what women can do for good governance.

The Myth: Women as ‘Political Cleaners’

Experiments are underway in some contexts to feminize notoriously corrupt public agencies. For instance, in 1998 Peru’s President Fujimori announced that the 2,500-strong traffic police force in Lima would be completely transformed into an all-women force, and in June 2003, the Mexican Customs Service announced that its new crack force of anti-corruption officers on land and sea borders would be entirely female.² In other contexts we can see similar assumptions about women’s probity guiding the portfolios given to women new to office. In Uganda for instance, the vast majority of positions of treasurer in the new local government system are assigned to women, where it is hoped they will apply their prudence in managing domestic accounts to curb mis-spending in local public office (Ahikire, 2003).

¹ This is exactly the point made by opponents of the proposed 84th Constitutional amendment in India, to reserve seats for women-only competition in the national parliament. Opponents say that this will reverse the trend to greater caste diversity in parliament by bringing more upper caste MPs – upper caste women – to office.

² ‘Mexico is gaining on smugglers’, *The Herald Tribune*, June 7, 2003.

The basis for the emerging myth of women's lesser propensity than men for corrupt acts is evident in the justifications used by officials for these integrity experiments that call upon women to use their gender as the intrinsic regulator of probity in public action. Consider the explanation provided by Commander Pedro Montoya, when training an all-female motorcycle brigade of traffic cops in Lima: 'the women are more honest and morally firm than the men. It's undeniable'. Montoya went on to posit that women are more honest because of their role as heads of the family. He asserted that they have an aversion to taking money from male drivers, because they feel this would resemble prostitution (Associated Press, *CNN*, August 21, 1998). Here, the positive motive for women's less corrupt behavior is that women's experiences as nurturers and family managers are the basis for a more caring and honest approach to interactions with clients or colleagues in public sector jobs. And Montoya also hints at a darker incentive: engagement in nefarious acts – being seen taking money from men who are not relatives – has drastic implications for women's sexual integrity. Sexual impropriety is very rarely an implication when men engage in dirty deals, though of course politicians and officials suffer from any hint of male homosexual encounters – suggesting as much was enough to blackmail many public actors in the West until very recently.

In Commander Montoya's defence of women's virtues as traffic cops, we see that two of the justifications used by politicians and philosophers in Europe for centuries for keeping women out of public life are now being used to bring them in. Women's caring roles in the private arena of the home are now seen as a positive qualification for public service, and the fear that a public life might compromise women's sexual integrity has now been dropped as the main reason for keeping them at home. Instead, it is hoped that the risk of being branded as sexually immoral will discourage women in public life from dabbling in dirty deals in dark places.

It is not just male reformers hoping to capitalize on women's supposed integrity who use these images. Women leaders do the same. Around the world, women leaders often try to deflect the mistrust and criticism with which the public regard them because of their gender with reassurances that their interest in politics is as mothers, as guardians, as carers of the nation.³ Right-wing parties and right-wing political leaders love the rhetoric of women's inherent probity. For women leaders in fundamentalist religious or chauvinistic nationalist parties, rhetoric about women's purity, integrity, and self-sacrifice can be employed to explain away personal characteristics and behaviors that would otherwise be unacceptable and that directly contradict their conservative social policies – for instance, their unmarried status or their striking militancy and calls to violence.⁴

This idea of linking notions of womanly virtue with uncorruptability is not, of course, new. It is based upon essentialist notions of women's higher moral nature and their propensity to bring their finer moral sensibilities to bear on public life, and particularly on the conduct of politics – an argument which saw considerable use by suffragettes a century ago. Ironically, it stands in direct contradiction with another essentialist notion that has for so long denied

³ See Jayalalitha's public imagery machine centered on the image of 'Tamiltaay' – mother, desirable woman, and virginal goddess (Bannerjee 2004), Indira Gandhi as Mother India, even Margaret Thatcher the tea maker for her kitchen cabinet.

⁴ Consider for instance the public rhetoric of Uma Bharti or Sadhvi Rithambara of the Baratiya Janata Party in India. Both are single never married women who flaunt rules about the conduct of unmarried women. See Basu 1996 for a discussion of how these and other women leaders in the Hindu fundamentalist party BJP 'invert' feminist discourses to justify their decidedly non-traditional activities and personal lives.

women direct access to politics – notions articulated by philosophers from Plato to Rousseau – notions about women’s inherent incapacity for abstract thought, and their unfitness to govern because of their inability to grasp basic notions of justice and ethical reasoning.⁵ In Rousseau’s conception, for instance, this unfitness comes from their ‘natural’ role as caretakers and custodians of affectivity, desire, and the body in the home. If appeals to personal connections and desires were allowed to move public debates, the principles of universality, impartiality, and justice would be subverted, as too would the convenient separation between the private and the public realms.⁶

In the 20th century Western psychology attempted to provide a scientific basis to these sexist assumptions about women’s essential nature, starting with Freud’s insistence that women have weaker ego boundaries than men (because they have no clear-cut Oedipal resolution) and therefore ‘for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men’. Freud concluded that women ‘show less sense of justice than men, (...) are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, (...) are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility’ (1925, 257 – 258). In Kohlberg’s famous experiments about resolutions of moral dilemmas, women are assumed to be able to reach only stage three in a six-stage measure of moral development. Women are seen to be deficient in moral judgment because they think of morality in interpersonal terms where goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others. Kohlberg sees this conception of goodness to be functional in the lives of mature women so long as they stay at home, but this moral perspective is inadequate to the needs of public life, where relationships must be subordinated to rules, and rules to universal principles of justice (Gilligan, 1982:18).

The current view of women’s inherent probity and hence appropriateness as leaders, bureaucrats, police officers and customs officials sees this old myth flipped around. The very traits that traditionally branded women as deficient in moral development, their care and sensitivity to the needs of others, their concern to help and to please, are now seen as functional for good governance reforms in developing and transitional societies. Not only are women’s domestic virtues seen as functional for combating corruption, but they may remedy a rather wide range of current political ills. According to Uganda’s President Museveni, for instance, who has been noted for his cultivation of the female electorate and his efforts to bring greater numbers of women into politics: ‘Women have stabilised politics in a way because they tend not to be so opportunistic. They tend to go after the interests of stability’. They are not so reckless like men’.⁷

For the last century at least, feminist activists and scholars have contributed to this kind of expectation that women can transform power and politics, appealing selectively to essentialist ideas about women’s effectiveness as conflict mediators, as moderators between extreme positions, as effective managers of the public purse. Anne Phillips sets out the three most common justifications employed by feminists for bringing women into politics: first, the argument that women can bring to politics a different set of values, experiences, and expertises, ‘that they will enrich our political life, usually in the direction of a more caring, compassionate society’ (1991:63). Second is the more radical argument that because women

⁵ Two excellent discussions of what male philosophers over the centuries have said about women to justify their confinement to the household and their incapacity for engagement in public debate and decision-making can be found in Okin 1979 and Lloyd, 1984.

⁶ For studies of Rousseau’s perspectives on women, see Schwartz, 1984.

⁷ Ann M Simmons and Robin Wright, ‘Gender Quotas puts Uganda in Role of Rights Pioneer’, *LA Times*, 23 Feb 2000.

and men are in conflict, women must be present in public life to represent women's interests as a gender. And the third is that it is simply a matter of justice: 'just as it is unjust that women should be cooks but not engineers (...) so it is unjust that they should be excluded from the central activities in the political realm' (62).

Phillips demolishes the first argument not only on the grounds that it is based on unproven essentialist assumptions, but that the values that women are likely to bring to politics may even be anti-democratic, given their own socialization in the decidedly undemocratic arena of the household.⁸ She challenges the second point on the familiar grounds that women do not constitute a single interest group and that even shared experiences by gender are mediated and experienced very differently by class, race, and other salient social divisions. She also argues that given the way votes are assigned to seats in most electoral systems, no women political candidate can seriously present herself as representing women alone, but has to look to the common interests of her constituency. She concludes that only argument for women's inclusion to politics that can be defended is the one drawn from principles of justice, and this case for justice 'says nothing about what women will do if they get into politics' (63).

Arguments based upon fairness, however, are less persuasive to policy-makers than instrumentalist ones that imply that the conduct and substance of politics will change. Thus many feminist students of politics, including myself, have combined the justice argument with either the expectation that women can transform politics, or with the insistence that women are needed to represent women's interests. There is indeed evidence from industrialized democracies that women in politics do focus more than men on passing legislation and implementing policies in areas benefiting women, such as child support programmes, family leave legislation, abortion rights, in the prevention of violence against women, and the achievement of gender equity in education (Burrell, 1994:151-2; Rule and Hill 1996). The same appears to be true for developing countries in which changes to electoral rules or the reservation of local and national government seats has brought more women into politics. Uganda and South Africa, both with more than a quarter of their legislature female, have seen the revision of laws on rape, domestic violence, and domestic relations (Meintjies, 2003; Goetz, 2003; and Hassim 2003). In Indian local government, where one third of seats are reserved for women, observers from Karnataka, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Maharashtra report that local spending patterns are now a little more responsive to poor women's concerns in spite of the formidable obstacles women councilors face from hostile male colleagues and government servants (Kudva 2003; Mayaram, 1996; Datta, 1998; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2001:19).

Research on the impact of women staff in developing-country public bureaucracies has sought to establish whether women service providers and decision-makers can overcome institutional constraints to identify with clients that share their demographic characteristics. Work in industrialized country bureaucracies has shown that bureaucrats from minority or socially excluded groups do indeed use their discretion to reduce the disparate treatment minority clients have received (Meier et al, 1989; Selden, 1997), but there has been rather less work on this area in the South, and it has produced less emphatic findings. My own work on women field workers in government and NGO micro-finance programmes in Bangladesh (where they were minorities in a male-dominated work environment) established that women field workers and managers did identify with some of the problems of their female clientele and acted as advocates for them within their organizations, exhibiting a form

⁸ It has been noted that in the Anglo-Saxon arena, women voters and politicians have until only recently favoured conservative parties and policies – see Edlund and Pande, 2002.

of 'local heroism' on behalf of poor women (Goetz, 2001). However, I also found that the group of field-workers I most expected to identify with clients because they were closest in class background to them – the lowest rung of staff, drawn directly from villages – took the greatest pains to distinguish themselves from clients and to identify with the male hierarchy of their institutions. The work of Simmons *et al* on family planning programmes in Bangladesh finds, like my work, that women staff represented a new advocacy resource for poor women in the rural context (1992). But work by Jewkes et al in South Africa, and Sargent in Benin, on nurses and midwives in maternity clinics, find alarming levels of abuse of pregnant patients by women staff (Jewkes et al, 1998; Sargent 1989).

The point of this very brief review of feminist work on women politicians and public servants is to suggest that feminist scholars and advocates have contributed to the myth of women's special contribution to politics. However, few have gone so far as to suggest that women are less corrupt than men. Very little indeed of the feminist literature on women in politics and bureaucracies has focused upon women's reaction to and engagement in corruption. The obvious reason for this is that it is extremely difficult to research. Most of the evidence on women's corruption or lack of it in politics or public services is anecdotal, or else can be derived parenthetically from case studies of public sector reform that happen to examine bureaucracies staffed by women.

Thus anecdotal evidence about programmes to feminize the traffic police in Lima or the customs service in Mexico so far suggests that these have been reasonably successful at eliminating petty bribery. Whether this is the product of women's gender and socialization, or of pride in being selected to perform an important public function, is not known. This sense of pride, public-spiritedness, and sense of a collective calling has been noted in a number of other experiments in reforms of degraded public services that hire wholesale a new category of people to staff new delivery systems. These new staff members can be male or female; what influences their excellent performance are new incentive systems and accountability systems producing a sense of group calling, and better monitoring (Grindle and Hilderbrand, 1995). The best-known examples of these are programmes described by Judith Tendler in her studies of agricultural extension services, small business support services, and primary health care outreach services in the state of Ceara in North-East Brazil (e.g.: Tendler and Friedhiem, 1994). One of Tendler's examples concerns an all-female service in extension of primary health care to poor mothers – but she does not examine the possible effect of gender relations or gendered socialization in contributing to the self-discipline and sense of probity and public-spiritedness exhibited by the women health workers. What we need to know about experiments in employing large numbers of women to rejuvenate degraded public services and to eliminate corruption, is not just whether and how gender relations may be employed to generate probity – or possibly to better control staff – but whether this has a temporary or sustained effect.

The world's biggest experiment in bringing women into local politics – the reserved seats in India that have ushered over one million women into local 'panchayats' – has been the focus of considerable attention for all manner of reasons, not least of them a concern to see whether these women new to local politics are able to reduce corruption. Most observers feel it is too early to detect a gender-specific impact on local corruption, and anecdotal accounts of women's impact on local corruption are wildly divergent. Some observers insist that women have reduced financial corruption in Panchayats (Kudva, 2003: 455; Datta, 1998: 118-9); others say that women in the reserved seats, often the wives of local elite men, are as deeply implicated in systems of corruption as their male predecessors – who are often their relatives

(Vijayalakshmi, 2003). Skeptics point out that expectations of a gender-related probity payoff to the policy of reserved seats is unrealistic, given women's much lower educational endowment than men, and their relative under-endowment in political skills acquired from party activity or civic engagement in traditional rural societies, points to which I shall return shortly.

The evidence:

We saw at the beginning of this paper that international development agencies are taking an interest in the relationship between proportions of women making up political assemblies and levels of corruption. The basis for this interest comes mainly from two studies circulated widely in 1999 in working paper form, then published in 2001. The first, 'Gender and Corruption, by Anand Swamy, Steve Knack, Young Lee, and Omar Azfar, was produced by the IRIS Center, University of Maryland in April 1999. The second, produced a few months later by the World Bank's Development Research Group, is by David Dollar, Raymond Fisman, and Roberta Gatti: 'Are Women Really the "Fairer" Sex? Corruption and Women in Government'. Both are based upon broad multivariate cross-country statistical analyses.

Both papers suffer from a problem afflicting any statistical analysis addressing corruption: the difficulty of finding a consistent or accurate measure of corruption. Corruption is a 'consensual crime' – both partners consent to the crime (however unwillingly) and neither reports it. Not only is it difficult to measure corruption, but it is hard to define it. Is corruption simply about the theft of public resources for private profit? What about actions that do not involve theft of money or property such as cheating in elections? What about the systematic exercise of bias in the allocation of public services or in the treatment given to clients by public officials, be they doctors or teachers or license-issuers?

In the Dollar, Fisman and Gatti paper 'Are Women the "Fairer" Sex?', the authors use the International Country Risk Guide's corruption index to measure corruption levels in the 100+ countries that they include in their analysis. This index is based upon other standard corruption indices, and all of these are based upon *perceived* levels of corruption as reported by business people, usually foreign investors, and sometimes by in-country bureaucrats and journalists. In other words, this measure of corruption is both relatively subjective, shaped by cultural prejudices of outsiders, and reflects the concerns of investors, and is a good illustration of the normative nature of definitions and measures of corruption. It does not capture forms of corruption that may most concern the average citizen or poor people in the country in question, which may be everyday 'retail' corruption or systematic bias in the delivery of public services rather than big bribes on business deals.

The Dollar et al study seeks to establish a relationship between numbers of women in parliament and levels of corruption, and uses levels of GDP and levels of civil liberties as controls on its findings. It finds a very high level of raw correlation between low corruption scores and relatively high numbers of women in parliaments (0.38), and finds that a one standard deviation increase in levels of women in parliament from the average of 10.9 % in its sample will result in a 10% decline in corruption. They also find that both variables are strongly correlated with overall development (as proxied by per capita income), and with other features of political openness such as the extent of civil liberties, average years of schooling, trade openness, and low ethnic fractionalization. Nevertheless, they find that the influence of women in parliament is large in magnitude, highly significant, and robust through a large variety of regressions, controlling for various variables. The authors conclude: 'women may have higher standards of ethical behaviour and be more concerned

with the common good' (Dollar et al, 2001:427). As Andrew Mason, one of the authors of the Bank's *Engendering Development* report sensibly commented on these findings: 'Whether this means that women are inherently more moral beings than men, I don't know'. Rather, he added, a higher level of women's political and economic participation is likely to signify that a country is more open in general, with more transparent government and a more democratic approach.⁹ Though this is unlikely to explain why numbers of women in office remain relatively low in transparent and open democracies like the US or Canada, it is probably the most sensible way to interpret very broad-brush findings such as are provided in regressions of cross-national data.¹⁰

The Swamy et al 'Gender and Corruption' study uses the same technique to show that in addition to large numbers of women in Parliament, when women comprise a larger share of the labor force, overall levels of corruption are likely to be less severe. This study also uses micro-level data from a study of 350 firms in Georgia in 1996, where the pressure to give bribes results in serious losses – at least 9% of the annual turnover. On average, women owners/managers of firms admit to giving bribes on approximately 5% of the occasions that they come in contact with a government agency. The percentage is twice as large for firms owned/managed by men. The authors feel this is suggestive of a marked gender differential in the propensity to bribe.

The Swamy et al paper also used data from World Values Surveys, which, in addition to hundreds of other items, asked men and women about the acceptability of various dishonest or illegal behaviors. Aggregating over all countries in surveys from 1981 and 1991, a gender gap emerged that consistently showed greater honesty on the part of women. For all 12 items listed, a higher percentage of women than men believe that the illegal or dishonest behavior is never justifiable. The case of greatest interest is responses to the question about "someone accepting a bribe in the course of their duties" -- 72.4% of men and 77.3% of women agree that this is "never justified". The paper goes on to test this result against all manner of other variables and finds that gender consistently overrides other variables in producing a more ethical stance on probity in public life. The authors conclude from this and the results of behavioral studies that women are more trustworthy and public-spirited than men. A policy inference is drawn: 'increasing women's presence in public life can reduce levels of corruption (Swamy et al, 2001:36).

What is notable about the evidence in these studies is that it is based upon women and men's reports and assumptions about the way gender shapes people's *reactions* to corruption, to the demand to give a bribe or the opportunity to take one. But it might well be that these studies are missing something. Perhaps gender relations condition the *opportunities* for corrupt or opportunistic behavior. Perhaps gender relations *limit* those opportunities. They would do so

⁹ Women's eNews: www.womensenews.org, April 4, 2002: 'World Bank to rate All Projects for Gender Impact'.

¹⁰ This is exactly the conclusion drawn by a critic of both the Dollar et al and the Swamy et al studies, who uses statistical analysis to show that the observed association between gender and corruption is spurious and is mainly caused by its context: liberal democracy (Sung, 2003:703). Sung's careful review of these two studies draws out other problems not discussed here: the misleading implications of proposing hypotheses about group behaviour on the basis of individual-level findings about female honesty, the failure to impose theory-driven statistical controls to the data, resulting in a failure to pick up on the role of constitutional liberalism in both reducing corruption and promoting women's presence in public office. Like my own analysis, Sung also identifies a failure in the Dollar et al and Swamy et al studies to examine the *processes* that connect female participation in government to reduced corruption (Sung 2003: 706).

if, for instance, corruption functions primarily through all-male networks and in forums from which women are socially excluded. This, as much as anything might explain apparently low levels of female corruption, or of women's low levels of positive response to opportunities for illegal behavior. And this might change when all-female networks are established, when workplaces become more feminized, or when women take top leadership positions that enable them to re-direct networks of illicit exchange to their own benefit.

How Opportunities for Corruption are Shaped by Gender

Women are relative newcomers to public office. We know that their recruitment to and treatment within the arenas of politics and public administration differs from that of men, but we don't know much about how this results in different opportunities for them to engage in illicit acts. Using examples from South Asia I will show how gender mediates women's access to the public sphere, and once there, to opportunities for illicit earnings. Interacting with class, religion, family connections, and caste relations, gender greatly restricts the access of the majority of women to political parties and to public sector jobs. In politics, this produces a markedly skewed distribution of women, with a tiny number of extremely elite women at the apex of weak party structures, and with larger numbers of women involved only when needed as voters or to increase the visibility of public protests. In bureaucracies, gender biases limit the numbers of women to legislated minimum levels that quickly become ceilings. In both politics and public administration, women who want to get ahead, like men, may find it hard to avoid the informal auctions for top posts – these involve bribing politicians in exchange for a job transfer or for the award of a candidacy in a desirable constituency. But the options that women bureaucrats and politicians have for the illicit generation of funds needed to purchase choice posts are limited by gender relations that forbid interactions with non-kin men. In socially conservative societies like India or Bangladesh, it is difficult for women to become either clients or patrons in the male-dominated patronage networks through which corrupt exchanges occur, unless they do so via mediators who are male relatives. Thus anyone's access to politics or good posts in the bureaucracy can be financially corrupting (because of the need to generate campaign funds or pay for an appointment), but for women, it can also be sexually corrupting.

Given the lack of research on how gender mediates access to networks for illicit earning, let alone the lack of explicit documentation about how such networks function, in this section I am obliged to grasp at straws, pick up on rumors about women politicians and bureaucrats recounted to me over years of research on gender and policy-making, but that I had mostly ignored because I dismissed them as ill-intentioned. The questions I am asking here have made me scabble through parts of my own past research on women in politics and bureaucracies that I had discarded, but that I see now offers hints and clues. On the cutting-room floor of my 1987-1991 doctoral thesis research into women field workers on micro-finance programs, for instance, I rediscovered interviews and case studies about decidedly un-heroic women development workers, who admitted to or were accused of corruption.

In political parties:

Political parties are the main gate-keepers to political office in India and remain so, in spite of contemporary innovations such as reserved seats for women or the exclusion of parties from local elections that are supposed to, among other things, by-pass the old boy's clubs that have kept parties from backing women candidates in substantial numbers. If we are hoping that women in political leadership will prove themselves less corrupt than men, we need to

understand the ways parties selectively recruit and socialize women to politics, whether political competition requires the use of ‘muscle’ and the generation of huge sums of money for campaigns, and whether parties offer women and men different opportunities for illicit or illegal activities.

A striking feature of party politics in all four countries of South Asia is the appearance of women leaders at the apex of parties at various times. This is not a reflection of women's political strength as a group in the region. In the mid-1990s *The Economist* asserted that promoting women into high office in South and South-East Asia because of their relationship as daughters or widows to powerful men who have been deposed or assassinated reflects the ineptitude of the region's political parties, which it calls: ‘rotten organizations incapable of producing a real leader’.¹¹ This is probably right. And ironically this same weakness, which is about an absence of democratic leadership selection systems and a reliance on dynastic systems of organizing power relations, also results in the marked absence of women in the rank and file or in office-holding positions below the top leader.

One way to understand this weakness is in terms of low levels of institutionalization. Political parties are considered to be institutionalized when they have, and respect, rules about candidate selection, identification of policy concerns, have an organization that is distinct from the personal connections of their leaders, and when their elected members form a distinct and coherent group in the legislature (Moore 2002; Randall and Svasand, 2002). Party institutionalization is considered essential for the consolidation of democracy in developing countries, for only when parties are stable and predictable in their membership and policy positions can voters make informed choices secure in the knowledge that their votes will influence the policies of the government. South Asian countries do have parties with deep roots in society, well-evolved internal rules systems, disciplined members and consistent ideological positions (notably the left parties in Kerala and West Bengal, probably the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, and up to the 1970s, the Indian National Congress). But the prevalence of personalized or dynastic leadership, patronage systems for delivering votes and generating campaign finance, and the growing electoral success of crude tactics of invoking exclusive ethnic or caste loyalties and inciting communal tensions has led to growing fragmentation and violence in party systems, and in some places the virtual disappearance of coherent policy platforms between which voters can select.

Under-institutionalization is a major reason for the relative *exclusion* of women as members and as candidates for public office (Norris, 1993) and for the relative hostility that political parties around the world exhibit to feminist policy priorities (Baer, 1999).¹² This, even if under-institutionalization can mean that a female relative of a deposed or dead leader can get the top party post because of rank and file loyalty to a family dynasty, for most other women, it is an insurmountable obstacle to participation at any level. Parties may be such blatantly hollow vehicles for kleptocratic families or ethnic groups, lacking any but the flimsiest organizational

¹¹ Cited by Richard Halloran, ‘Asia’s Women leaders on the Outs’, *Global Beat Issue Brief No. 34*, May 6, 1998.

¹² Of course, well-institutionalised parties have also been resistant to women’s participation – one need only look at the numbers of office-bearers and electoral candidates who are women in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala or West Bengal to see this. As Georgina Waylen says, it is not ‘that hyper-institutionalisation is good, but rather that low levels of institutionalisation produce problems and make lasting change difficult to achieve’. In contrast: ‘in an institutionalised system there is stability in the rules of competition and party organisations matter: therefore rules, for example over quotas and candidate selection, can be enforced more easily’ (2000: 790-1).

structures, decision-making processes, and ideologies, that they simply offer no purchase for an internal democratization project designed to promote gender equity or to increase numbers of women at any level. Engagement at any level in the party is dependent upon access to caste, family, and usually all-male networks of patron-client relationships. Not only does this make political parties extremely unlikely arenas in which ambitions for social change can be pursued, it can make the women who do try to seek advance within parties *socially* unattractive, and sometimes sexually suspect. Access to leadership positions within the party, to electoral candidacies, to finance for campaigns, is dependent upon relationships with powerful men within the party. And such relationships, unless sanctified by kinship connections, can bring discredit to women.

Since women leaders have come in laterally to parties, via personal connections to powerful men, not rising up from the bottom, or perhaps through business links, they often lack experience of political alliance-building, debate and tolerance of opposition, long-term strategizing, campaign resource-generation, and policy development. A notable exception to this is Mamata Bannerjee, a long-time activist in the Indian Congress party, whose frustrations with central party controls lead her to form the intermittently successful break-way faction in West Bengal, the All India Trinamul ('Grassroots') Congress.¹³ For other women leaders, lateral and late entry to politics can mean that they lack a secure constituency base. For instance, Sonia Gandhi, the head of the Congress party, had never until recently run for electoral office – she had no public, no constituency of citizens that she had cultivated over years and to which she had to respond.

This problem of a shallow political base and fleeting political apprenticeship may be one reason why some women leaders in South Asia have resorted to crude populism to build up social support, and to authoritarian tactics within their parties to undermine dissent and opposition. Indira Gandhi famously began the long process of the de-institutionalization of the Congress party when after 1972 she put a halt to internal party elections and strengthened a patronage pattern whereby aspirants for party posts had to petition her directly. Driven, from the beginning of her first 10 year period in power, by the wish to break free of the patrician 'Syndicate' of established party notables and elites, she shattered many aspects of internal party organization and centralized power in her own person and in the person of the Congress president for each state (personally appointed by herself) (Jaffrelot, 2003:133).

For the large number of women who are interested in political participation if not directly in leadership, parties limit access because of the masculinity of party cultures and the sexual dangers that they represent. That parties are often organized around masculine patronage networks is not a new observation and is as true in the UK or USA as in any developing country (Short, 1996; Perrigo, 1996; Baer 1999). Proof of this can always be found in the phenomenally low numbers of women members, branch managers, and executive officers in parties around the world. In India, figures on female membership of parties are difficult to obtain, but accounts from my interviews with MLAs suggest that no party save perhaps the

¹³ Unlike any of the other current heads of parties or heads of regional branches of parties: Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mayawati, Mamata Bannerjee does not have a reputation for corruption – this in spite of heading for a while the Union government's Railway Ministry – with a large budget and plenty of opportunities for making illicit earnings. She quit the BJP government which she was supporting over a corruption scandal implicating senior figures including the Ministry of Defence (the Tehelka affair in spring 2001).

CPI (M) in West Bengal have more than 10% female membership, and even there, no women are to be found at all in the state-level central committee.¹⁴

Amongst the regional parties there are interesting exceptions. In Tamil Nadu the All-India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) has made concerted efforts to bring significant numbers of women into executive positions and into branch management positions (Ghosh, 1999). One third of the AIADMK's general council, its highest decision-making body, is female. One quarter of the 80,000 'primary units' of the party – the village-level organizations -- are all-female, and women are to be found in the post of deputy secretary or secretary in the other 60,000 units. However, the motives of the spectacularly corrupt general secretary of the party, and twice Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, J. Jayalalitha, in boosting women's presence, are unlikely to do with a desire to build internal democracy -- she has been accused by the opposition in the state of having personally nominated all office-bearers of these primary party units.¹⁵ This is very likely a bid to develop a female support network for her own leadership. In Uttar Pradesh, where the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a caste-based party appealing to dalits, has been able to front a woman as Chief Minister twice, there are reports that one effect of Mayawati's electrifying leadership has been the massive entry of women to the grassroots of her party.¹⁶ Both the AIADMK and the BSP are identity-based parties lacking in clear internal structures and internal democracy.

There is so little research on the experiences of women within these regional parties that we cannot say whether women, once present in significant numbers, are able to promote less corrupt means of generating campaign finance or less corrupt dealings in office. The very fact that these regional parties are trying to increase the numbers of women in their membership is in stark contrast to the mainstream parties, particularly the Congress, the CPI (M), and the BJP, that still front very few women candidates in spite of giving lip service to the long-stalled proposal for an 84th amendment to the Constitution to create reservations for women in national politics. In the 1999 general elections just 10% of the candidates backed by Congress were women. Seven percent of BJP candidates were women, and 7% of CPI (M) candidates were women. These major parties claim that it is impossible to find qualified women candidates, but they show no evidence yet of responding to the emerging cadre of women with political experience in local government by recruiting them directly to their parties.¹⁷ Instead, they continue to work through men at grassroots level. When they need to find a woman to run for a reserved seat in local elections, they find a locally powerful and popular man who has a female relative to front for office. This phenomenon of working through men has meant that many women local government councilors in India are seen as acting as surrogates for their husbands (Kudva, 2003: 452). Women who have held reserved seats at village, Block, and District levels are not backed by parties when they attempt to run again in the next election when the seat is de-reserved, and thus they are unable to build up local political capital and skills.¹⁸ Reasons for the continued neglect of women by the main parties have to do with the inappropriateness of direct contact between male party activists

¹⁴ It is extremely difficult to obtain gender-disaggregated figures for party membership, let alone figures for aggregate membership, as parties prefer to remain vague on this point to suggest that they have a very broad, if not explicitly signed-up and fee-paying, grass-roots membership.

¹⁵ 'Jaya challenges DMK on women's quota', *Indian Express*, March 25 2002.

¹⁶ Personal communication, Kavita Srivastava, General Secretary, People's Union of Civil Liberties in Rajasthan, Jaipur.

¹⁷ Personal communication, V. Vijayalakshmi, Bangalore, interviews with BJP and Congress MLAs and activists in Jaipur in 2003.

¹⁸ Interviews with Congress, CPI (M) and BJP MLAs and activists in February 2003, Jaipur.

and non-related women, and of course gender-biased attitudes that fail to recognize the political skills of women in office or aspiring for office.

Another reason that parties are ill-equipped to attract women that is rarely mentioned in analyses of South Asian politics is that parties represent an arena of sexual danger for women, and political competition brings risks of physical and sexual assault. This is not a problem for the elite women, but for others participation in branch-level politics can be sexually compromising, exposing women to the sexual attentions of male party members.¹⁹ In Bangladesh and Pakistan, politically active women who are not protected by high level males are sometimes threatened with sexual assault (Jahan, 1982). Perhaps this is the reason that Jayalalitha has formed all-female branches of her AIADMK – to create sexually safe arenas in which to capture women’s political energies. Parties that are highly disciplined at the branch level, such as the CPI(M) or the TDP are reported not to suffer so greatly from this problem.

Likewise, parties organized on the basis of religious or ethnic chauvinism may also offer women more sexual security than do secular parties because of the traditional and therefore protective take they have on women’s sexual integrity. Some South Asian feminist political scientists worry that this may be one of the reasons for the apparent effectiveness of religiously conservative associations in attracting women, notably the family of militant Hindu chauvinist associations supporting the BJP (Basu, 1995; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995).

The point I am trying to make in this section is that the ways women are recruited (or not) to the leadership and rank-and-file of political parties restricts their opportunities for engaging in corrupt activities. These restrictions have to do with women’s relative exclusion from male patronage networks, and the sexual danger associated with inclusion. The policy of simply increasing the numbers of women in the political arena through reserved seats has still barely altered these patterns of exclusion in parties. There is little evidence yet that parties are responding to the increased numbers of women with political experience by recruiting or promoting them. This is because, to put it crudely, it is not women’s skills or experience or talent or charisma or even hard work that matters to parties – it is just mainly their gender and their family connections. Under the circumstances if women do exhibit less corrupt reactions than men to opportunities for illicit earnings that may simply be a sign of their freshness in office, lack of familiarity with ways of subverting the rules, and an understandable eagerness to prove themselves worthy of public office – effects that can wear off with time.

The bureaucracy

There are obstacles to women’s employment in public bureaucracies, particularly at senior levels, the world over. Quite aside from structural problems stemming from sex-typing of women in the education system and labor markets, and from the competing demands of women's private lives, the civil service in many countries has acquired an elitist culture and has institutionalized male privilege and superiority. In South Asia, the highly competitive selection process and demanding training have been noted, until recently, for their ability to

¹⁹ I have had to base these assertions upon interviews with and observations of women activists in political parties and in the women’s movement in Bangladesh and India.

instill high levels of commitment, professionalism and probity too (Heginbotham 1975; Kothari and Roy 1969; Potter, 1986). The selection and training processes in these professional administrative services have attracted less study for their gender biases, but percentages of women to be found in these services remain low. In Bangladesh, there is a recruitment quota system in the civil service. Since 1972, 10% of gazetted and 15% of non-gazetted posts has been reserved for women. This has in practice become a maximum ceiling for women recruits, rather than a minimum threshold. Quotas have had the effect of stigmatizing women's presence in the civil service, where they are regarded as having gained access by virtue of their sex, rather than merit. On the other hand, they have without question allowed for a greater presence of women in public service than would have occurred without special measures.

For the few women at higher levels of public bureaucracies in South Asia, and the larger numbers at lower levels, opportunities for engagement in illicit income-generation can be expected to be limited in the same ways as they are for women in politics. Women bureaucrats will have fewer access to networks for illicit activity – for instance through links with business – than men.²⁰ They are likely to have limited access to other patronage networks unless they wish to risk putting their sexual propriety on the line. This will be particularly the case in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan that have witnessed a contemporary stiffening of Islamic mores in public life. Revisiting notes I made a decade ago interviewing relatively senior women in government development service bureaucracies in Bangladesh I note a number of laments made by women: they felt isolated at the workplace because there were so few other senior women and they simply could not interact with men. They felt they had been shunted into the least interesting and attractive positions, positions that were almost always linked to their gender. For instance, they had to look after social development concerns, or the women's development desk. They felt that their prospects for promotion or even for moving horizontally to better posts in the bureaucracy were limited because of their inability or unwillingness to curry favor with senior men (as this could only be misconstrued), or to offer bribes to party workers or to senior bureaucrats.

The bulk of my interviewees were lower-level government staff, field workers on the state's flagship micro-finance program. Again, on revisiting my field notes, I am reminded of cases that I did not follow up in my search for 'local heroes'. These were rumors about field workers who were bending the rules or stealing money. The types of corrupt activities involved were most commonly the siphoning-off of a 'commission' from the tiny loan given to each woman. More rarely, bigger frauds were attempted – for instance encouraging villagers to invest in some business from which the field worker was due to profit. Almost always, reports of this kind of activity were accompanied by scandalized accounts of sexual impropriety. Such cases were rare, and differed from the types of corrupt acts of which male field workers were accused. Male fieldworkers might, for instance, make deals with local elite men whereby it was agreed that credit money could go to the wives of these elites (who were not eligible for loans because they were not poor), or they might agree with local politicians to focus loan-giving activity on that politician's constituency in exchange for a healthy 'commission'.

Women field workers tended not to engage in these kinds of deals because of the impropriety of working in this way with non-kin male strangers. But there was another type of rule-bending to which women field-workers admitted, and to which men did not, that was viewed

²⁰ For a discussion of the importance of business links in the corruption of officials, see Honour et al, 1998: 195.

with approval by women field-workers and women villagers alike. In my 1989 field work, I found that the women field workers who helped their loanees get the best returns on their money were the ones who encouraged them to engage in activities on the margins of 'straight' market engagement: speculative purchasing and hoarding of commodities like rice or firewood for re-sale at high prices in lean seasons, on-lending at high interest rates to poorer women, adulterating products by dilution or alteration (e.g.: putting chili into vegetable oil and selling it as the expensive mustard-seed oil) or frankly illegal cross-border trading in saris and other Indian goods – in a word: smuggling

This example ought to lead us to question the cultural presumptions and the disciplining intent behind definitions of corruption, a project of current interest to some anthropologists (Harrison, 2003). Certainly the activities that some women field workers encouraged were sometimes outright illegal – they involved bending market rules for the benefit of poor women, and probably also for their own benefit. The finding that women field workers tried, when they could, to bend rules to their own or their clients' advantage may suggest that opportunities for corrupt acts or illicit earning may be more open to women when these arise in a socially acceptable environment – when there are larger numbers of female staff with which one can collude, or when there are female clients to either abuse or collude with.

Anecdotal evidence about the behavior of women doctors and nurses in hospitals and clinics in India,²¹ as well as the studies mentioned earlier about the abuse of patients by nurses and midwives in two African countries (Jeweke et al, 1998; and Sargent, 1989), likewise suggests that in a female-dominant working environment, or where women professionals are dealing with women clients or with a socially inferior class, women professionals are not averse to extorting unofficial 'payments' for services that ought to be provided as a right.

Of course, the discussion presented here is not based upon reliable evidence – much more research is needed on the interactions between women bureaucrats and clients across a range of public services to determine if indeed there are more opportunities for illicit earnings in more female-dominant public environments where the sexual risk of engaging in corrupt acts is reduced. Again, my point here has been to suggest that whatever the response of women to such opportunities, we have to note that the opportunities for corruption that are open to women are themselves limited by sexual controls and their exclusion from male networks.

Gender and corruption: the questions we ought to ask

One question not currently asked in the myth-making around gender and corruption is whether women face different forms of abusive or corrupt behavior from public officials than men. Are women asked for bribes less often than men because they are not seen to have as much money? Or do they tend, as home-managers, to face corruption of different types and at different levels than men working in the formal economy – in other words, an 'everyday' form of corruption, 'informal' payments for public services, payments that are not measured in formal indices of corruption levels? Is the 'currency' of corruption sometimes sexual harassment or abuse? For instance, do officials extort sexual favors, rather than money, in return for services? These are questions about gendered opportunity structures in corrupt exchanges. Evidence that women managers of firms in Georgia may pay fewer bribes

²¹ Collected from field work on anti-corruption struggles in Rajasthan, 1998 – 2002; and from a study on anti-poverty health initiatives in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (Reddy and Jayalakshmi 2003).

(Swamy *et al.*, 2001) must be tested against the proposition that they may be asked for bribes less frequently by male officials than are male business managers.

By suggesting that corrupt practices may function differently by gender, I am suggesting that in all the excitement about the potential of exploiting supposed feminine virtues in the fight against corruption, (what can women do for good governance) we might overlook the challenge of combating corruption in ways that respond to women's concerns (what governments should be doing for women).

To expect that women's gender alone can act as a magic bullet to resolve a corruption problem that is much bigger than they are, that is systemic, is unrealistic to say the least. It reflects not just wishful but almost desperate thinking. If women do exhibit preferences for less corrupt behavior, that may simply be because they have been excluded from opportunities for such behavior, and that effect is bound to change over time as greater numbers of women enter public office. The state in Peru can only afford to pay women traffic cops in Lima a salary of just 200 dollars a month; not enough to keep a family alive. Men previously in these jobs had to supplement the salary by demanding bribes from motorists to let them off real or trumped-up traffic violations, or by selling tickets to motorists for non-existent police charity barbecues. Women traffic officers have not yet stooped to this, perhaps out of pride in their work and also out of a desire to maintain the image of sexual purity, not taking money from strange men. But their families still have to be fed. I am afraid that women's exemplary performance in this area is a cousin to their performance in the micro-finance field: their success in managing on so little, and in managing with such impeccable credentials, is contingent on their exercise of a female-identified behavioral pattern: self-exploitation. Is that a good thing? Under the circumstances, when we look at the petty corruption encouraged in borrowers by female field workers on micro-finances in Bangladesh in the late 1980s, should we read this not as a sign of venality, but of a type of rebellious empowerment simply not permitted to women in the disciplined and clean development world they are expected to construct?

For if there is one thing of which we can be sure it is this: women will not passively conform to the idealized notions of their finer moral nature when they have families to feed and if there is money to be made from public office. A massive cultural change is underway in the public sector the world over: more and more women are entering public sector jobs and elected public office. They are bound to bring changes of style and substance, and not in the ways that the World Bank would like to predict. Their actions will be a response to the structural contexts in which they operate. As subalternized recent entrants, unschooled in the qualities possessed by the political and administrative establishments and therefore unable to compete directly with them, they may well experiment with patterns of leadership and management that could demonstrate impeccable integrity. Or they might do the opposite, and damage democratic accountability systems.

It is a huge exaggeration to say that women are now seen as a panacea for problems of corruption in politics and public bureaucracies by the World Bank or other major development agencies. However, now that an instrumentalist argument may be available for advancing women's presence in politics and the public service, the Bank and other development agencies are taking more interest than before in the challenges of promoting women in public life. My concern in this paper has not been to prove or disprove assertions that women are less corrupt than men. Rather, I am concerned about the way the seductiveness of a hunch about a feminine reluctance for dirty dealing is rushed into the

status of a home truth in a context where 'bad governance' is now seen as the reason why countries stay poor, and donors are all looking for a quick fix for that problem. In the meantime, insufficient attention is paid to the possible reasons why women may be exhibiting greater integrity in public dealings. It may well be that women are exhibiting less corrupt behavior when in public office precisely because they are generally excluded from male-dominated patronage and power networks in political parties and public bureaucracies. A policy of engineering more access for women to these public arenas may either produce a sub-set of public actors who are relatively isolated from the arenas in which real power is exercised, or it may mean that women make their way into these still unreformed power arenas, and join in the take. Investing in the myth of women's incorruptible nature instead of investigation of the reasons for that behavior will postpone the institutional reform necessary for a transformation of public institutions in the interests of gender and social equity.

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