

Course Name: GENDER INCLUSIVE URBAN SPACES: ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

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Module 4.1 - Women Leaders in Urban Governance

Hi, I am Varsha. I've completed my master's in Development Studies from IIT Madras. Currently, I'm pursuing my doctorate studies in the domain of gender and politics. I'll be discussing urban governance and its many aspects with you, particularly its gender dimension. So, I will start with an introduction to urbanization, urban governance, and a few relevant policy frameworks.

Then, I will briefly discuss urbanization in India and its implications for urban governance. This will be followed by a closer look at urban governance in the Indian context and its women leaders. And then, the two case studies—those of Kerala and Tamil Nadu—will be elaborated. So, urbanization in the Global South is not generally seen as a smooth process, offering a very planned, regulated, and even process of development. Just as cities are starting to confront the many aspects of urban transformation, urban governance too is trapped in a complex network.

Urban governance basically refers to the development of social, economic, and environmental spheres; resource allocation; service provisioning; and consultation with and participation of stakeholders. The criticality of urban governance in shaping urban lives and livelihoods, to an extent, answers the question of why it is essential to involve women in urban governance. So, there has been a long history of international commitment to women's inclusion and participation in local governance. For example, there is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which speaks about women's right to participate in public life. To pinpoint, Article 7 of CEDAW asks states to ensure women's equal participation in politics by taking appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination.

The Beijing Platform for Action also makes a similar call by asking states to remove barriers for women's inclusion and participation in decision-making bodies and power structures. The Millennium Development Goals also underline the importance of women's engagement in governance and politics. Specifically, there is Millennium Development Goal number 3, which seeks to promote gender equality and empower women. Then, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda includes a stand-alone goal on gender, SDG 5, aimed at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

Additionally, the agenda has incorporated a gender perspective into all 17 of its goals. Then, we have the New Urban Agenda of Habitat III, which focuses on granting women access to the right to the city. This also includes an explicit plan for the inclusion of women in urban policymaking and planning. But despite all these efforts, there has only been a marginal increase in the meaningful engagement of women in governance and politics.

If we take the case of India, unlike the general global pattern, India has made a mark with the remarkable presence of women in its local governance bodies. But this is exactly where the problem arises. That is, how much of this participation of women in local governance bodies translates into a positive impact on policies addressing gender equality issues or the fulfillment of feminist goals? The answer to this question remains uncertain, and this question also becomes the central problem of many research studies exploring local governance and its gender dimension in India. So, the 74th Constitutional Amendment, enacted in 1992, concerns urban local bodies in India—their structure and functioning.

It also emphasizes democratization, civic engagement, and women's participation in urban local bodies. Then, Article 243T of the Indian Constitution speaks about the reservation of seats—that is, one-third of the total seats for women, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes in urban local bodies, which also includes offices of chairpersons. Later, in 2009, an amendment was made to this article to increase the share of reserved seats for women from one-third to half of the total seats. Following this amendment, many states, including Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have legislated for a 50 percent reservation for women in urban local bodies. Before moving on to a detailed discussion of urban governance in India, I think it is essential to look at urbanization and also its consequences for urban governance.

This is because India has a unique pattern of urbanization, which also presents many novel challenges and also opportunities for women in urban governance. There is Darshini Mahadevia, a well-known scholar who mainly explores equity questions in urban processes and planning. Darshini Mahadevia's studies of Indian cities provide some important insights into the process of urbanization in India. Mahadevia argues that the processes of change happening in urban India have five parallel strands.

These include elitist visions of cities, contesting agendas of infrastructure development and poverty alleviation, displacement and rehabilitation resulting from project implementation, a predatory state, and gradual transformation of the cities. The point Mahadevia is trying to make here is that the chaos and confusion arising from these multiple processes of change in urban India point to the fact that the Indian urban scene will develop or progress only gradually. So, the question is: What, then, are all these claims of a rapid transformation to world-class cities and urban branding?

According to Mahadevia, these claims are simply tactics to allow individual or private interests to enter the play. As we have seen in the many land scams and land grab cases across metropolitan cities in India. So, it is in this context where urbanization is opening up many new and unfamiliar realms of contestation, exploitation, and claims-making that New Public Management gains significance. So, New Public Management has certain fundamental principles, which, according to Roth, incline more towards managerialism and new institutional economics. This also makes governance more about steering and less about government.

What this means is that NPM is mostly concerned with promoting competition, increasing citizen participation, improving economic efficiency, and outcomes. So, there is value for money and synergizing different sectors to solve problems. But most importantly, NPM also redefines citizens as customers, highlighting the values of accountability and transparency. A striking point to note here is that the very framework of NPM, or New Public Management, and its fundamental principles align very well with the agenda of good governance, which became popular among states with the onset of liberalization.

So, the Good Governance Project gave rise to a new governance discourse, which was endorsed and promoted by international agencies. So, this new governance discourse envisions a minimal role for government in a post-liberal state. But this goal of minimal government can only be achieved if citizens govern themselves to the greatest extent

possible, thus reducing spaces for government interference. Thus, the new governance discourse makes the ideal subject of a post-liberal state the consumer-citizen. A consumer-citizen is simultaneously empowered by the forces of the free market while he or she also submits to the rules of the market and takes on their citizenship duties.

This is what a consumer citizen is. But when we turn to the case of urban India, not everyone fits this picture of the ideal subject of a post-liberal state—that is, a consumer citizen. This category of empowered citizens largely excludes the urban poor, who are still struggling against their disempowerment. So, this creates a kind of deep division in the terrain of urban politics. In another study by James Harris on Chennai city spaces, he notes the role of associations and organizations in the urban politics of Chennai, and he references new politics. New politics is a kind of novel activism that is taking shape around the organizations and associations formed by urban residents belonging to middle- and upper-class backgrounds. And this, at times, becomes synonymous with middle-class activism as well.

So, what distinguishes this new politics from the old party politics is the absence of political parties and leaders in the former. However, on the other hand, we have the urban poor in India, who continue to rely on these same parties and party leaders to make their claims and wrestle for their rights because they do not have much access to these sophisticated spaces of new politics or middle-class activism. I have explained these processes, structures, and dynamics mainly to validate the point made by Mahadevia regarding urban India—that the Indian urban scene involves different processes unfolding on parallel tracks and highly fragmented urban change. Against this backdrop, urban governance in India, I think, can then be ideally described as dealing with setting up infrastructure to attract global capital and managing the urban poor.

Now, let us take a closer look at urban governance in India and its women leaders. To do that, Mary John's paper is a very good resource. It has some interesting findings too. But first, let me introduce Mary John to you. She is a well-known scholar working in the field of gender studies and feminist politics.

Mary John's paper on urban governance is relevant to this discussion because, in this paper, she critically analyzes two major themes that recurrently emerge in debates or discussions on the reservation of seats for women in urban local bodies. This paper by Mary John is based on a research study of the councilors in Delhi and Bangalore municipal corporations. So, the two things that Mary John discusses in her paper are the

proxy phenomenon and the critical mass rationale of reservation. Responding to the first question, John's study points out that though there are a few women who remain passive throughout their term, any simple conclusion on the proxy question is not possible.

This is because when women enter public politics, upsetting the classic housewife relationship, a whole spectrum of possibilities emerges for them. In other words, we can say that these women develop over the years and establish links with the political sphere in distinctively different ways. So, any neat categorization of these women is nearly impossible. Another important suggestion that John makes in her paper is that any future research on the proxy phenomenon needs to look at the processes or changes that are triggered when women gain entry into politics.

Then, taking up the reservation question also brings up two opposing arguments. This is regarding the putative identity of women. So, responding to this dilemma or to get past this, John frames the question of reservation a bit differently, making the central point that the significance of feminism is to be relevant even in spaces predefined by other power relations or collective identities like class, caste, religion, etcetera. So, then linking the not-so-encouraging responses that she got from the counselors through the reservation question with the basic argument in support of reservation—that women would constitute a distinct political force via reservation, John underlines the limited scope of women for being a collective force. This also brings me to another important argument made by Andrea Cornwall and Anne-Marie Goetz in their paper, *Democratizing Democracy*. This, I think, can more clearly explain the conclusion made by John with respect to the reservation question—that there is only a limited scope for women to be a distinct political force via reservation. What Cornwall and Goetz say is that the essentialist equation between sex difference and political interest is a mistaken one, because there are a number of other factors—like political party affiliation, the style of one's political upbringing, or in short, the political apprenticeship of a person—that can more clearly define one's political interests and perspectives.

So, the widely held assumption that women ought to be representatives of women's interests and represent a female constituency tends to neglect these many other factors and also the accountability networks that women hold. They also make another point with respect to the affirmative action of reservation itself. They say that reservation—the act of reserving seats for women—is a bit flawed because it does not automatically urge political parties to raise gender justice issues nor does it constitute an electoral constituency committed to feminist politics.

So, these make it difficult for women to steadfastly pursue feminist politics throughout their political career. The different aspects of urbanization, urban governance and its women leaders that I spoke about until now, was to set a larger backdrop against which we can discuss and make sense of the two case studies that of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. First, let us take up the urban scenario in Kerala. So the political decentralization was implemented in Kerala in the 1990s as part of the Good Governance Agenda.

And the primary aim of this decentralization project was to enhance citizens' participation in governance, including that of women. However, studies that later reviewed this whole process indicated or showed how meaningful political participation of women failed to materialize. This is obvious in the pattern of women's engagement in rural local bodies. So what happened is that, development altruism rather than politics was emphasized and this made the elected women representatives of rural local bodies development agents rather than politicians. But on the other hand, the urban scenario and urban governance in Kerala present a different case.

That is the cities in Kerala are starting to treat urban governance as urban management, stressing infrastructure development and managing the urban poor. So women politicians therefore need to fashion themselves as the new urban managers. Therefore, highly educated women from a middle or upper class background with minimum political links are chosen considering the elite and civil connotations of the term urban management. In this all profile of the women candidates, their class background is of particular importance as it would enable them to skillfully navigate urban governance, and also makes them very adept at handling the interest of the capital.

However, this also implies that senior party members may not be able to exercise complete control over these women at all times, especially when huge financial interests are involved or when their own interests are at stake. Thus, urban local governance in Kerala can be described as comprising intense power struggles, dominance of political parties, involving huge financial outlays, and many local associations and organizations. In other words, success for women in urban governance does not rest merely on exercising general power or having knowledge of the rules. What they require are negotiating skills to build connections, seize emergent opportunities, and build support bases among powerful groups. In short, one can also say that refusing to engage with politics is the surest way to failure for these women in Kerala's urban governance.

To better understand Kerala's dynamic urban politics, we also need to be familiar with the ongoing changes. What I mean by this is that the last local body polls held in the state indicated certain shifts in the broad patterns of urban governance. This also showed that there is an ongoing mismatch between feminist politics and the kind of state feminism currently being pursued in the urban space of the state. The last local body polls held in the state occurred amid the pandemic.

So, senior party members were replaced with young women, students, and professionals. But most of these women lacked a strong political background. This generated two kinds of arguments. One group supported the increased participation of youth in politics and negated any kind of essentialist relation between age and political experience.

The opposing group, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of one's political apprenticeship in shaping the political perspectives of a person. The Left Democratic Front Coalition, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxists, also fielded many young women in the last local body polls. Among these candidates, the coalition's candidate for the Thiruvananthapuram Urban Local Body gained wide recognition. But to understand how the choice of this particular candidate indicates a shift or a kind of change in the pattern of urban governance, we need to analyze the profile of the candidate and compare it with that of the earlier women councillors and mayors. As I mentioned earlier, the spatial location of urban governance is marked by the leverage of capital, contesting agendas of development, and urban lands also become instruments of wealth creation.

So, these settings call for leaders who can engage in politics with efficient managerial skills. Keeping this point in mind, let us now take a closer look at not only the profile of the candidate but also her political apprenticeship, perspectives, and agenda. Responding to the question of political apprenticeship in an interview, the candidate refers to a brief experience in a few party organizations. She also recurrently mentions people's affection for her, and her strong faith in the party as her defender or guardian. But the question is, how much do these seem to offer in the form of strategies and skills to navigate urban governance or urban politics? Answering another important yet strategic question—that is, about her plan or agenda of governance once in office, she speaks a lot about leading a corruption-free, efficient administration with a united governance body, without the usual party power struggles. But many studies have shown that in the rapidly urbanizing cities of India, these are not really high up on the agenda of urban management. Therefore, this raises doubts regarding the success of the candidate unless she manages to build support bases among powerful groups, alliances, and networks. The shift in the party's choice of

the candidate with respect to class background indicates a sharp change in the profile of women in urban governance.

The particular candidate does not share the same class background as her predecessors. And because of that, she is kind of unfamiliar with the internal dynamics of urban politics. So, the shift in the party's choice of the candidate can be read as a break from the previously observed trends or it can also be interpreted as a strategic move to create enough space for individual or private interests to play out in the domain of urban governance by exercising control over its various dimensions. And trying to understand this case with a feminist critical lens pinpoints certain blind spots in state feminism too. One tends to doubt if the agenda of feminist politics has been co-opted by state feminism and if the strategies for mainstreaming gender have been informed by political pragmatism rather than a desire for a genuine gender justice outcomes. Such exercises that are informed by practical considerations can also have the effect of depoliticizing the very realm, or quoting the many studies in the field of gender and politics, we can also say that trying to achieve or deliver gender justice outcomes by simply increasing the participation of women in governance holds little promise unless these are also backed by a strong feminist agenda. So, no definitive conclusions can be drawn from this case study. Rather a convenient strategy I think would be to closely watch how the political trajectories of the candidate and that of urban governance in the state unfold in the coming years.

There is yet another change that is taking shape around rural local bodies in the state that also needs to be looked at briefly. The urban local bodies are starting to handle increasing amounts of capital. This is evident in the infrastructure projects that they are or are going to implement in the coming years. Plus, there is also an urban spread that is happening across Kerala. What all these point to is the increasing permeability of capital into rural areas.

And the possibility that certain changes will soon take place in the realm of rural governance in the state. So, this calls for a reworking of the rural-urban division in local governance. The point I am trying to make is that this can also have implications for women engaging in local governance. To be more precise, the value of gender power and knowledge of the rules in determining the success of women in rural governance needs to be reconsidered. Now, I will take up the second case study—that of Tamil Nadu.

Here, I will focus more on Chennai. Discussing the second case study is mostly to demonstrate just how distinct urban governance scenarios are in India. This means that these distinct scenarios can also have very different impacts on women leaders. So, there is a serious dearth of in-depth studies on Tamil Nadu's urban governance. But Archana Ghosh's study of Chennai municipal elections in 2001 is a very informative paper.

It also gives us some important insights into urban governance in the state and its functioning from a gender perspective. In 1994, reservation of one-third of seats for women was introduced in Tamil Nadu. Later, in 1998, the comprehensive Tamil Nadu Urban Local Bodies Act was passed, repealing the preceding Municipal Corporation Acts and the Tamil Nadu District Municipalities Act of 1920. However, the old scheme of reservation in the state is a bit different. That is, the rotation of seats reserved for women is affected every 10 years or at the end of the second term.

The main reason for freezing the reservation of seats for a 10-year period was to provide some stability for the candidates standing in the reserved constituencies and also to ensure their efficiency. But it has some downsides. That is, the selection of constituencies to be reserved for women is not based on any well-defined scheme or regulations. Rather, it is mostly done in an ad hoc manner where the winnability of the ruling party becomes the decisive factor. So, as a result of this, the representation of women is not fairly spread out over the city.

Besides, the larger political background in the state has a very influential role in shaping the functioning of urban local bodies in the state and also the local body polls in the state. The highly volatile nature of political alliances often leads to infighting and defection, and sometimes it also leads to electoral violence in the state. Taking a brief look at the profile of women councilors shows that the majority of them are reasonably well educated. But unlike their counterparts in Kerala, these women themselves or their family members have strong links with political parties. Some of them even hold important party posts.

But these women are not really economically independent, as they are not full-time career women. In another study by James Harris, which I mentioned earlier in the discussion, he very well documents the influential role of associations and organizations in the urban politics of Chennai. The urban residents, who mostly belong to middle and upper-class backgrounds, are starting to reject the political parties and party leaders because of their

incompetence in resolving the pressing problems of the city. And these residents, through their associations and organizations, are also fielding their own candidates.

And they complained that the candidates backed by the political parties failed to rise above the party line and make a positive impact on urban governance. However, the candidates supported by the urban residents mostly failed to secure victory, losing to those backed by the political parties. On the other end of the spectrum, we have the urban poor, who continue to support these political parties and the leaders to make their demands on the state. What all these indicate is that political party affiliation is a very decisive factor in shaping the nature of urban politics in the state and also the political careers of candidates in urban governance, both male and female.

This is again proved through the experience of women councillors who failed to get renomination from their political parties. The fundamental argument for freezing the reservation of seats for a 10-year period, as I mentioned earlier, was to assure these women that they would be able to get a second chance or a second term if they proved themselves to be efficient managers. But the intense competition for power between the political parties and the volatile nature of political alliances cost many women their hard-earned political careers. Because political parties started preferring candidates with money and muscle power to ensure winnability. So, these women were left with few options: either to change their party affiliation or, if they had access to enough resources and support bases, to contest on their own.

But a few managed to get party tickets because of their connections with male party leaders. Here, the renomination of women is an exception rather than a rule, and it is seen as a reward for their loyalty to or sycophancy towards political parties and leaders. The intense rivalry between the political parties also overshadows the election manifestos and campaign strategies, that is, instead of discussing the pressing problems that the urban residents face in the city, the election manifestos mostly discuss the ideological battle between the political parties. Women are no exception here.

So, the general assumption that women ought to be representatives of women's interests is again falsified. Because women also speak about the points or the issues that are highlighted by the political parties rather than represent any particular female constituency. And this is to secure their political careers. The central conclusion of this study is that the legal provision of fixing reserved constituencies for a particular term is not in itself an efficient strategy to deliver opportunities for women.

We also understood that the political parties and party leaders have a very influential role in shaping the nature of urban politics or urban governance in the state. This is very evident in the dysfunctional urban local bodies in the state. That is, civic body polls are going to be held in the state after a gap of almost 10 years. So, I have added a few points to guide further discussions or researchers. I think it is important that future researchers look at the many other dimensions of Tamil Nadu's urban governance, particularly how the key features of the process of urbanization in the state are reshaping the governance discourse and how gender figures into these.

Similarly, a comparative framework to study urban governance scenarios in Kerala and Tamil Nadu will be very beneficial because despite having many similar circumstances to foster urban management, Chennai presents a very dissimilar case with the very dominant role played by political parties and leaders in its urban governance. So, juxtaposing the case of Tamil Nadu's urban governance with Kerala, can reveal continuities and disruptions in the urban governance regimes of the two states. Similarly, the rise of Hindutva nationalism and its response, as well as many responses to the wave of Hindutva nationalism from minority communities, including the rise of Muslim feminism, can affect the terrains of urban local governance.

Considering the demographic trends and political dispositions, this can generate distinctive responses and outcomes in the urban governance spaces of both states. Thank you.