

Case Number 1996.0

## Women as Leaders: Lessons from Political Quotas in India

### Introduction

In April 1993, the Indian government approved a constitutional amendment that would forever change the face of rural politics. The landmark legislation mandated that village councils—traditionally the bastion of higher caste males—hold regular elections and reserve one-third of the seats for women, and additional seats for individuals from lower castes. Soon, villages across India began witnessing the quiet upending of a centuries-old system of political patronage. The most populous democracy in the world had embarked on a grand experiment—dubbed “one of the best innovations in grassroots democracy in the world” by the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> More than 1.5 million women would be elected to lead hundreds of thousands of villages,<sup>2</sup> home to 800 million people.<sup>3</sup>

India, however, was not alone in its efforts to increase women’s representation in elected government. In 2012, only twenty percent of all parliamentarians were women.<sup>4</sup> And across the world, women faced considerable challenges in influencing public policy.

Proponents of political quotas believed that higher numbers of female leaders would improve accountability on women’s issues, and create more equitable policies. In the 1990s, largely due to the advocacy efforts of women’s groups, a groundswell of support for political quotas began to emerge. The influential 1995 United Nations Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called for women to have a “full and equal share in... political decision-making,” and urged governments to adopt policies that fostered female leadership.<sup>5</sup> Vocal detractors, however, argued that quotas for women would “crowd out” the political representation of other marginalized socioeconomic or ethnic groups and heighten inequalities within countries. While others posited that quotas would lower the

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<sup>1</sup> Celia Dugger, “In India, Lower-Caste Women Turn Village Rule Upside Down,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> International Center for Research on Women, “Opportunities and Challenges of Women’s Political Participation in India: A Synthesis of Research Findings from Select Districts in India,” 2012, p. iii.

<sup>3</sup> Census of India 2011, Rural Urban Distribution of Population available at: [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data\\_files/india/Rural\\_Urban\\_2011.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/india/Rural_Urban_2011.pdf) (accessed April 20, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Inter Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments, 2012, available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> (accessed April 20, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, UN Women, available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2013).

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overall quality of representation because women were either less experienced or uninterested in leadership positions.<sup>6</sup>

By 2012, more than half the countries in the world had adopted political quotas for women.<sup>7</sup> The types of quotas and degrees of reservation varied widely, but all the systems were designed with one overarching motive: empower more women to lead.

Despite the rapid rise of political quota systems there was remarkably little rigorous evidence on their effectiveness. Did more female leaders result in more gender equal societies? Could a mandatory change in the balance of power reduce discrimination against women? Did quotas change perceptions about female leaders? For many years, researchers could not single out quotas as the cause of more gender sensitive policies. Much like the proverbial question of whether the chicken came before the egg, scholars could not be sure if countries that had adopted quotas were already becoming more gender equal, or if quotas bred more female leaders who promoted gender equality. The design of the reservation policy in India, however, offered a rare chance to understand the true impacts of quotas—with potential lessons for governments and businesses everywhere.

## The Gender Gap

By 2000, women had consistently outpaced men in several areas of educational attainment and professional achievements. In upper-middle income countries, the majority of college graduates were women.<sup>8</sup> And in 2009, more than half of all employees in high-paying management and related professions in the United States were women.<sup>9</sup> But significant barriers prevented them from assuming the mantle of leadership in politics or business in many parts of the world. Competing demands on women's time, lack of role models in traditionally male-dominated fields, and deep-rooted cultural biases, all contributed to the low level of female leadership in elected government.

Women continued to bear the disproportionate burden of domestic responsibility, often acting as primary caregivers for children and elders. The responsibilities of familial care imposed constraints on women who were either trying to enter or stay in the labor force. Women were also more likely to take a few years off from high-powered careers and work less hours when they did return to the work force resulting in lower earnings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rohini Pande and Deanna Ford "Gender Quotas and Female Leadership: A Review, Background Paper for the World Development Report on Gender," 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank Gender Statistics Database, available at: <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/gender-statistics> (accessed May 1, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment and Earnings, 2009 Annual Averages and the Monthly Labor Review, November 2009.

<sup>10</sup> M. Betrand, C. Goldin, and F. Katz, (2009) "Dynamics of the Gender Gap for Young Professionals in the Financial and Corporate Sectors," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 2 (3): 228-55.

Certain social norms and stereotypes made voters less likely to vote for women leaders.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, political parties had been historically slow to incorporate the interests of women in their mandates and were known to invest fewer resources in female-led campaigns.<sup>12</sup> Without enough role models or mentors to emulate, women were not likely to be motivated to run for leadership positions.

Governments hoped that quotas would create a more equal playing field and would help women overcome some of these challenges. Indeed, by 2012, there were more women in elected government than ever before. Women were heads of 17 countries and made up more than 20 percent of parliamentarians in the world, up from 12 percent in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Despite these gains, the United Nations predicted that the ideal “parity zone” of 40-60 percent women’s representation in democratic governments was unlikely to be achieved—even with quotas—before the end of the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> For instance, although the quota system in India had created one of the largest cadres of female leaders in the world, it was only limited to local government.<sup>15</sup>

### **Building Blocks of Democracy**

Village councils, or Panchayats (Sanskrit for council of five elders), had existed in India for centuries and, with varying numbers of council members, had served much like Western town councils. After India won its independence from the British in 1947, venerated leader Mohandas Gandhi hoped the Panchayat would become the newly-independent nation’s shining emblem of self governance. But the fledgling national and state governments were hesitant to devolve too much power to local authorities, and Panchayats, across the country, with notable exceptions, remained largely defunct.

The sweeping 1993 constitutional amendment, commonly called the Panchayati Raj Act (or power to Panchayats) sought to revive India’s local government, and placed the village council at the heart of a decentralized government apparatus. The law provided for a democratically elected three-tier Panchayat system that would operate at the village, block and district levels (with the district office reporting to the state government). All three tiers would be required to hold elections every five years.

Members of the village council and its leader—the village chief—would be elected by the villagers. The village council would be required to hold several meetings during which villagers would ratify decisions related to village management. Although village chiefs were given broad powers, the law attempted to create a fully representative democracy that gave villagers the chance to voice their demands and map their own development. By significantly

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<sup>11</sup> L. Huddy, and N. Terkildsen, (1993) “Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates.” *American Journal of Political Science* 37: 119-47; A. Eagly, S. and Karau, S., (2002) “Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward Female Leaders,” *Psychological Review* 109 (3): 573.

<sup>12</sup> UN Women, “Who Answers to Women: Gender and Accountability,” 2008-2009.

<sup>13</sup> Inter Parliamentary Union, “Women in Politics: 2012”; “Women in Politics: 60 Years in Retrospect,” 2006, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> UN Women, “Who Answers to Women: Gender and Accountability,” 2008-2009.

<sup>15</sup> In the late 1990s several leaders introduced a bill to extend quotas for women at the national and state levels in India. But the effort was thwarted almost as quickly as it began. In the decade that followed, more attempts were made to revive the bill but they all faced a similar fate. In 2010, amid much anticipation, the Indian parliament’s upper house passed a bill to reserve one-third of seats in the national and state legislatures for women, but the lower house failed to approve it.

increasing the political representation of women and individuals of lower castes, through quotas, the legislation also tried to redistribute the balance of power.

With reforms in place, village councils began administering public services like water and education, and disbursing funds for government welfare schemes. Female village chiefs found themselves in a position unimaginable just a generation before—wielding considerable village-wide power and responsible for making important decisions such as allocation of public finances.

### **Discrimination against Women in India**

Women, in much of India, experienced routine discrimination because of their gender. A widespread preference for boys led to abortions of girl fetuses. According to the 2011 census, there was a skewed ratio of 940 women for every 1,000 men in India.<sup>16</sup> Fewer girls attended primary and secondary school than boys. Girls were also more likely to be pulled out of school to care for families and younger siblings. As a result, in 2011, 65 percent of Indian women could read and write compared to 85 percent of Indian men.<sup>17</sup> Violence against women continued to be a systemic but rarely acknowledged problem, and the deeply ingrained Hindu caste structure intensified the vulnerabilities of lower-caste women.

Gender inequalities pervaded Indian politics as well. Even though India was one of the few countries to have ever elected a female head of government—Indira Gandhi—only 11 percent of the national parliament was female in 2012.<sup>18</sup> The Panchayati Raj Act was undoubtedly responsible for increasing women's representation in local politics. The percentage of women in local government ballooned from 5 percent in 1993 to 40 percent in 2005—higher than the mandated reservation of 33 percent.<sup>19</sup>

Observers, however, noted that female village chiefs were not always effective or successful. In some instances, men were using their wives or mothers as proxies and leading from behind. Vocal critics denounced the reservation policy as a mere mask for male incumbency. The fact that a significant portion of the women in political office had no training or experience in local government, and lacked the skills to manage entire villages, led many to believe that the policy was misguided. After years of sustained female leadership, however, there was a growing body of evidence that could separate the rhetoric from the results.

### **From Quotas to Impacts**

In the early 1990s, as the quota system took effect in local government, India also began experiencing an unprecedented economic boom. A slew of economic reforms ushered in a sharply higher growth rate, helped reduce poverty, and transformed the nation into a global player. Between 1990 and 2010, India had grown into the fourth

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<sup>16</sup> Census of India, 2011, "India at a Glance," available at: <http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/indiaatglance.html> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Inter Parliamentary Union, Women in Parliaments 2012, available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (accessed April 25, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Rohini Pande and Deanna Ford "Gender Quotas and Female Leadership: A Review, Background Paper for the World Development Report on Gender," April 2011.

largest economy (in terms of purchasing power parity) in the world, and its Gross Domestic Product had nearly quadrupled.<sup>20</sup> It was possible that both the quotas and the growing economy contributed to changes at the village level, but the design of the Indian reservation system offered social scientists a unique opportunity to rigorously examine the impact of gender quotas.

In accordance with the Panchayati Raj Act, only women could compete for seats assigned to them. While one-third of the slots for village chiefs in a district were reserved for women, the slots rotated to different villages every five years. In effect, the positions for female village chiefs were randomly allocated in each election cycle. In any given district, largely similar villages had one important difference, they were either led by women or not—allowing researchers to draw direct causal links between the outcomes in villages that were led by women and the quotas that had put them there.

In the early 2000s, social scientists began exploiting this natural random assignment process to carefully compare villages with female heads to villages without. Did quotas make Panchayats more responsive to women's needs? Did they alter attitudes about women leaders? Did female leaders change the preferences of voters? And did being exposed to more female leaders shape the aspirations of younger generations? The vast Indian experiment in grassroots democracy had also set in motion a search for credible answers to longstanding questions about the real impact of quotas.

#### *Service Delivery and Efficiency*

In 2010, a comprehensive study of village councils in 11 Indian states found that villages with female leaders made greater investments in key public services like drinking water, education and roads.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the study confirmed that quotas for women leaders had not only helped raise the profile of issues the female electorate considered important, but also significantly improved service delivery in those areas.<sup>22</sup>

In the same 11-state study, villagers also reported paying fewer bribes in villages led by women. A smaller empirical study conducted in 2004, in villages of West Bengal and Rajasthan states, arrived at similar findings.<sup>23</sup> Increases in service delivery combined with lower corruption indicated that quotas for women were leading to more efficient use of resources at the local level.

#### *Political and Civic Participation*

Researchers also examined if quotas were spurring greater political participation among women in rural India. Did more women run for election or voice their opinions as a result of quotas? A study in the state of Maharashtra

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<sup>20</sup> "India's Economy: The Half Finished Revolution," *The Economist*, July 21, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> L. Beaman, E. Duflo, R. Pande, and P. Topolova, (2010) "Political Reservation and Substantive Representation: Evidence from Indian Village Councils," India Policy Forum, Brookings and NCAER.

<sup>22</sup> Indian villages led by men tend to invest in projects on irrigation and vocational training for farmers. Many villages, however, lack direct access to drinking water and women are often responsible for walking long distances everyday to collect water for their families.

<sup>23</sup> R. Chattopadhyay and E Duflo, (2004) "The Impact of Reservation in the Panchayati Raj: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomized Experiment," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(9): 979-986.

found that when only women could run for village chief, with no competition from men, there was a ten-fold increase in female candidates running for office.<sup>24</sup> Strikingly, according to the same study, more women entered an electoral race—even when the seat was open to both men and women—if the seat had been reserved for a woman in the previous election cycle. In West Bengal, researchers found that for village council seats that had been allocated to female village chiefs twice, the number of women elected to office in the subsequent election cycle more than doubled. This was, however, not true for seats that had been reserved for women only once. Quotas also had a positive influence on female constituents. Women were 25 percent more likely to speak at a village meeting when the head of the village was a woman.<sup>25</sup>

### *Changes in Attitudes*

Perhaps some of the most telling research was conducted on how attitudes about women leaders changed after quotas were introduced in rural politics. Female village chiefs often reported that their gender created significant challenges when they first got elected. In villages of West Bengal state, male and female villagers were broadly critical of first time female leaders, regardless of their on-the-job performance. But after two rounds of quotas for women, villagers rated female leaders on par with their male counterparts, suggesting that the cultural bias against female leaders, while initially strong eventually subsided.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, male villagers, in particular, disliked being forced to elect women in the first round of reservation but the backlash largely dissipated after the second round.

With the help of commonly used tests in psychology, researchers also explored how quotas had changed the conscious and subconscious attitudes of male villagers. In a simple experiment, researchers randomly assigned villagers to listen to taped vignettes of speeches delivered by hypothetical male or female leaders. Men from villages with no female leaders rated the speeches by women far below male leaders. Interestingly, men from villages with female chiefs overwhelmingly rated female leaders above male leaders. Being exposed to a female leader had readjusted men's stereotypes about women's ability to lead.

In another psychological experiment researchers tried to assess subconscious attitudes about the role of women. In villages with no female leaders, men readily associated women with domestic activities. But in villages with female leaders, men were far less likely to do so. Quotas appeared to have helped male villagers recognize that women could play a role outside the home. On some measures, however, the attitudes of male villagers were inalterable; across all sample villages, men consistently revealed their implicit and explicit preferences for male leaders.

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<sup>24</sup> R. Bhavnani, (2009) "Do Electoral Quotas Work after they are Withdrawn? Evidence from a Natural Experiment in India," *American Political Science Review*, 103(1).

<sup>25</sup> L. Beaman, E. Duflo, R. Pande, and P. Topolova, (2010) "Political Reservation and Substantive Representation: Evidence from Indian Village Councils," India Policy Forum, Brookings and NCAER.

<sup>26</sup> In West Bengal, like in other Indian states, one-third of the seats for village chiefs were randomly assigned to women. But because West Bengal also reserved seats for historically disadvantaged caste and ethnic groups every election cycle, seats for women were not set aside by pure rotation. Between 1998 and 2007—from the first election with quotas to when researchers collected data—a village could be in one of three states: never reserved a seat for female chief, reserved a seat for female chief once (in 1998 or 2003), or reserved a seat for female chief twice (both in 1998 and 2003).

### *Aspirations of Parents and Adolescents*

In addition to studying the direct impacts of quotas, researchers measured how female leaders influenced the aspirations of families. Did a dramatic increase in the number of female role models point to societal shifts in how girls viewed their futures. And did parents invest more in girls' education after they were exposed to female leaders. A study administered surveys to both adolescents and adults in the households of nearly 500 villages in a district in West Bengal state.<sup>27</sup> The surveys asked a range of questions, from the amount of time adolescents spent on domestic activities to parents' aspirations for their children. As in other studies, concrete changes at the village level were observed when villagers had been exposed to female leaders for a sustained period of time. There were sizable differences between villages that had never experienced a female leader and villages that had reserved seats for women in two election cycles.

In villages that had never experienced a female chief, parents were 14 percentage points less likely to hope that their daughters studied past secondary school, even as they wished their sons would graduate and get a job. But in villages that had been reserved for female chiefs twice, the gap between parental aspirations for boys and girls narrowed significantly.

Differences in the aspirations of adolescent girls and boys also grew much smaller in villages that had reserved seats for female leaders twice. Adolescent boys in non-female led villages were 6 percent more likely to attend school and 4 percent more likely to be able to read and write than adolescent girls. Girls in villages that had never experienced female leaders reported spending approximately an hour and a half more every day on household chores than boys. But in villages that had two rounds of female leadership, the gap in educational outcomes between girls and boys was virtually eliminated, and the time girls spent on household activities decreased by a substantial 18 minutes. Moreover, girls were significantly more likely to report wanting to marry at a later age as well as indicate greater interest in a career outside of the home.

In all, the empirical studies offered convincing evidence that, over time, female leaders broke down stereotypes about women's abilities to lead. The quota system had created role models and empowered younger generations of girls to dream of futures vastly different from their mothers. Parents too updated aspirations for their daughters and no longer believed that a woman's place was confined to the home. Quotas helped reshape voters' attitudes and resulted in more female candidates competing for and winning in seats not reserved for women alone. In the long term, quotas yielded significant benefits to rural India. But like any single policy, they did not provide a lasting solution for gender discrimination.

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<sup>27</sup> L. Beaman, E. Duflo, R. Pande, and P. Topolova, (2012) "Female Leadership Raises Aspirations and Educational Attainment for Girls: A Policy Experiment in India," *Science*, Vol. 335, 582-586.