Unraveling the Persistent Political Gender Gap in Developing Countries

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Women around the globe, but particularly in many developing contexts, remain absent and invisible in political institutions and dialogue. This may seem surprising with the rise of the #metoo movement across the West and the groundbreaking number of women running for office in the United States in 2018 it is easy to imagine similar gains to women's representation around the globe. Even more, as of 2015, women's suffrage in democracies is nearly universal and more than 130 countries have gone so far as to implement political quotas for women (Hughes et al 2019). Gender quotas, for example, have been shown to increase women's representation, shift policy towards women's interests, and improve gender equality along other dimensions (Lott and Kenny 1999; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Miller 2008; Beaman et al. 2009; Catalano 2009; Ford and Pande 2011, Clayton and Zetterberg 2018).

Yet women as citizens show up and speak up less in political spaces than men across much of the globe and particularly in lower and middle-income countries. Figure 1 depicts this gender gap in political participation based on data from the World Values Survey Waves 1-6.[1] A positive gender gap indicates that on average men participate more than women. In most regions, the only measure on which women show up as much as men is the rate they turn out to vote. The exception is the Middle East and North Africa where on average 20 percentage points fewer women report voting than men. Looking at non-voting political participation tells a different story. In low and middle-income regions, far fewer women participate in politics on non-election days than men. In fact, women in South Asia participate in politics on average 20 percentage points less than men. This large gender gap is supported by data from an original survey in India, which demonstrates that women participate in local politics at one third the rate of men, far eclipsing the caste gap in political participation (Artiz Prillaman 2017).

Our understanding of gendered inequalities in political participation derives in large part from research on high-income democracies (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Inglehart and Norris 2000; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014). Seminal theories focused on explaining individual-level political behavior begin from the premise that access to resources – money, education, and time – conditions the costs of political engagement. The gender gap in political participation therefore is argued to be the result of a gender

[1] Figure 1 plots the gender gap in reported voting in the most recent national election across seven global regions and the gender gap in non-voting political participation, specifically via protesting, petitioning, striking, or political occupation.

gap in resources (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Women, to a greater degree than men, have not accumulated the political and non-political resources necessary to reduce the costs to political participation. The implication is that, as resources equalize, so does political participation.

Alternative traditional political economy models, as argued principally by Becker (1981), have focused on the household instead of the individual and explain women's lack of participation as the efficient outcome of the household division of labor. In this model, women bear the responsibility for the household because of a marginal advantage in childcare and corresponding socialization patterns. Households' interests are therefore perfectly aligned and households behave as unitary actors. One implication of this model is that this economic division of labor could also generate a political division of labor with men representing the household's interests in political spaces because of greater access to relevant resources and subsequent lower costs of participation.

Iversen and Rosenbluth (2006) argue that to explain cross-national variation in female labor force participation and women's political preferences, models of household behavior must account for incomplete marriage contracting and the risk of divorce. They suggest that the risk of divorce generates incentives for both women and men to invest in outside options as insurance. In this model, women are likely to have different political preferences than men over policies that would reduce the costs to non-household labor and allow them to invest more in these outside options. Their model thus no longer assumes the household will behave as a unitary actor. Following the logic of Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001), women's increased economic engagement under threat of divorce is likely to help to equalize the gender gap in resources and yield greater political participation by women.

The present experiences of women in low and middle-income democracies pose a challenge to these models of political behavior: while women's political participation remains below that of men, it varies importantly within and across countries even when risk of divorce is held constant. For example, in the specific case of India, where my work has been focused, women's political participation remains low on average but grassroots women's movements have emerged and effectuated important political change. A notable example is the Gulabi Gang in India, an informal group of women in North India known for their pink Saris that have fought to reduce domestic violence and have become a political force to be reckoned with. How can we explain the persistently low participation of women in politics across many developing countries while also building models that account for the growing number of contradictory cases?

To begin, several relevant facts must be incorporated into models of gendered behavior in

developing countries. First, even in regions where divorce is rare and a strong economic division of labor persists, intrahousehold preferences often diverge (Gottlieb et al 2016). In recent work I have argued and demonstrated how gendered preference differences can emerge from the economic division of labor itself. Take, for example, the public provision of water. While the entire household benefits from the provision of water, women, in their role as household caretaker, bear the responsibility for the collection of water. They therefore have a greater stake in the quality and location of water provision than their husbands and are more likely to prioritize the provision of water in their political demands. Intrahousehold preference differences can also derive from gender-specific experiences (for example, violence against women) or simply because women have a desire to increase gender equality.

Second, gender gaps in political preferences often go hand in hand with gender gaps in political participation. Women may remain absent from political spaces even if their preferences are underrepresented in those spaces. Recent work by Sarah Khan (2017) shows that women are more likely to prioritize their husband's preferences, especially when the intrahousehold preference differential is large. These first two conclusions suggest the need for a model that can explain household coordination but allow for intrahousehold variation in preferences.

Third, while resource stocks may correlate with political participation and may even be a necessary condition for political participation, removing the gap in resources alone is unlikely to induce women's political participation (Desposato and Norrander 2009; Gottlieb 2016). For example, using original survey data from rural India, I find that 86% of the gender gap in political participation is left unexplained by differences in resources (education, labor market participation, free time, voluntary activity, and civic skills) from a Blinder Oaxaca decomposition.

Motivated by these facts and the variation in women's political participation in India, in my book project I study the case of rural India to ask why most women remain absent from political spaces, when and why women mobilize, and when gender becomes a unifying and politically salient identity. My theoretical model centers on the household and the nature of political coordination in patrilocal, non-nuclear families, arguing that most households will coordinate their political behavior and behave as a unitary actor. This creates a household political division of labor, where men act as the political agent of the household and vocalized household preferences skew in favor of men's interests.

Why would women coordinate their political behavior with the household? I argue that the degree of women's social isolation/social connectedness shapes their capacity to coordinate their political behavior *outside* the household. Gender-biased social norms limit women's role outside of the

household (Chhibber 2002). Often the woman's space is seen as the house whereas men have the freedom to engage in community institutions and politics in particular is seen as a man's space. This division is enforced with substantial mobility constraints: 72% of women in a representative survey from India reported having to ask permission to visit a friend or family member in their village and 23% said that even if granted permission they would not be allowed to go alone. All of which is enforced through a fear of backlash, often through social sanctions and even violence.

Broader political systems also differ markedly in low and middle-income contexts. Faced with clientelistic linkages between the political elite and citizens, the costs and benefits to participation change (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes 2009). Many of the constraints imposed on women's mobility and connectedness inhibit them from access to clientelistic networks. Strategic politicians observe this household coordination and minimize their mobilization costs by efficiently targeting critical nodes within their networks. Women's social isolation therefore further restricts their political participation by limiting their access to prevailing political networks.

This political division of labor therefore underrepresents women's interests and suppresses women's voice as a result of disparities in economic bargaining power, intra-household resources inequalities, and gender-biased social norms, creating a system of gender-based insiders and outsiders. Despite the infrequency of divorce, this coordination is inefficient due to intrahousehold preference differences.

When women's social networks, however, shift in such a way as to include more women, women's political participation is likely to increase. To test this relationship, research I conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India leveraged a natural experiment that created as-if random variation in exposure to an NGO program aimed at mobilizing women into small credit collectives. Participation in these women's credit groups yielded substantial increases in women's non-voting, local political participation through three key mechanisms: political coordination within the women's group as opposed to the household, information dissemination, and the development of civic skills.

Women's representation as citizens in political spaces is important on normative grounds of political inclusion and on political economy grounds because it is likely to cause policy change. We know that when women enter politics, policy changes. In India, women's representation in local elected offices increased the provision of certain public goods (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). In Latin America, women's political movements have yielded the greatest impacts on policies aimed at combating violence against women (Htun and Weldon 2012). And in Sub-Saharan Africa women's representation in national office is associated with greater political engagement by women (Barnes

and Burchard 2013). Yet, our understanding of women's decisions to participate in politics has for a long time failed to recognize that the constraint to doing so is not simply lack of resources, a household division of labor or the rules of divorce, but the combination of all of these with social norms that preclude extra-household political networks. Once we recognize this, it becomes possible to explain and respond to the persistent gender gap in political participation across developing democracies.

The study of the political economy of gender in developing countries remains an exciting and open landscape. As low and middle-income countries democratize, industrialize, deindustrialize, urbanize, and diversify, the opportunity to understand the micro-foundations and macro-consequences of women's political behavior will continue to grow. There remains an open research agenda to tie together the importance of social coordination for individual and collective political participation, thinking carefully about the intersectionality of identities, to create an integrated explanation of the gender gap in political participation that accounts for the nuanced experiences of women in low and middle income contexts. In doing so, it has the potential to shed light on how systems of behavior fit into a broader understanding of governance and pathways to political and economic development and highlight the particular role of women's inclusion.

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