SHORT ARTICLE

Who *Actually* Governs? Gender Inequality and Political Representation in Rural India

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Research on representative democracy often assumes that elected officials from disadvantaged and dominant groups have equal input into decision-making once in office. Drawing on an original micro-level survey in 320 Indian village councils, we leverage both reputational and behavioral measures to show that this assumption does not hold. Women elected via gender quotas do not equally participate in decision-making processes within village councils. We additionally show that these inequalities owe to both discrimination and selection mechanisms. Recognition of this underappreciated form of political inequality is imperative for scholars to accurately identify the strengths and limitations of descriptive representation. From a policy standpoint, this suggests that reforms aiming to increase the representation of members of traditionally excluded groups (quotas) may not be sufficient to enable individuals from long-excluded groups to play a central role in decision-making.

One of the most basic assumptions about representative democracy is that those elected to govern actually shape government decisions (Dahl 1961). In democratic institutions that require collective decision-making (elected councils, assemblies, and other deliberative bodies), variation, however, exists in the degree of centrality of elected members. Overlapping social inequalities lead some actors to play a more decisive, central role in decision-making than others (Cruz and Tolentino 2019; Parthasarathy, Rao, and Palaniswamy 2019). State intervention may thus be required to disrupt hierarchy and ensure marginalized groups' substantive political representation (Mansbridge 1999).

In this article, we draw on original micro-level data from India to map the extent to which members of marginalized groups—women with varied levels of skills and privilege—play a central role once elected via one such state intervention: quotas. We document variation in centrality, focusing on the processes of decision-making. We study the extent to which officials exercise voice and influence in political deliberation, are seen as occupying a central role in decision-making, and are perceived as central in governance more broadly (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Vera and Vidal 2022).

Prior research documents the many disadvantages that individuals from marginalized groups experience in political decision-making processes, as citizens and candidates (Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 2001). However, this research has not explored the barriers faced by these groups after reaching office. Moreover, evidence suggests that political gender inequality is even more acute in the Global South (Carpena and Jensenius 2021).

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We document the extent to which members of marginalized groups—here, women—are central in political decision-making after they reach office, via quotas, in a Global South context. Measuring how central a role officials play in collective decision-making bodies is challenging. To overcome this, we leverage both behavioral and reputational measures to shine light on this underappreciated form of political inequality among already elected officials. Across eight measures of voice and reputation in decision-making, we find that women elected via quotas do not play an equally central role after they reach office. Our analyses suggest that this form of gendered political inequality owes to interference and discrimination by others, alongside underlying structural inequalities that constrain the influence of quota-elected women officials.

CONTEXT

As the democracy with the largest set of quotas for traditionally excluded groups, India presents an important test of whether or not political institutions can alter longstanding patterns of political exclusion (Brulé 2020; Chauchard 2017). In 1992, the 73rd and 74th Indian Constitutional Amendments devolved considerable power to the local level and mandated that village councils "reserve" seats for women and members of lower castes.

Quotas have allowed women the chance to access the position of village council president (*sarpanch*), our focus here. At present, many states randomly allocate half of village president seats to women during any given electoral period. We study a cross-section of village councils in the Indian state of Maharashtra, India's second-largest state. Successful political movements have led to the election of all-women panchayats in rural Maharashtra and successful candidates in urban centers (Omvedt 1990), making the state a relatively progressive setting in terms of gender equality.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

While much work highlights the positive effects of gender quotas (Beaman et al. 2009; Bhavnani 2009), many nonetheless speculate that women officials elected via quotas in India are mere "proxies" for traditional elites or men as family members (Ban and Rao 2008). In another context, Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) find evidence that quotas reinforce negative stereotypes of women politicians. In line with this, our central hypothesis is that officials in gender-reserved seats are unequal after they are elected in the degree to which their voice is heard and recognized as central in decision-making.

We hypothesize that two mechanisms sustain this form of gendered political marginalization: discrimination and selection. First, quota-elected women often face political exclusion (Htun 2016) and bias from higher-level authorities and bureaucrats (Purohit 2023). This may be either "statistical" discrimination—based on assumptions about the average characteristics of women elected under quotas in a context of imperfect information[1]—or it may be "taste-based"—driven by a distaste for all women elected officials in general (Bertrand and Duflo 2017). We observed such bias in the unwillingness of male politicians and bureaucrats to acknowledge the presence of women politicians in local government meetings and in their refusal to share documents and resources (like local government budgets, circulars on policy changes, and government checkbooks) with quota-elected women. Second, selection effects may be at work. This would be the case if quota-elected officials play a less central role in governance because they possess fewer political resources due to structural disadvantages. We explore each channel; we expect that both discrimination and selection mechanisms play a role (and likely interact) in the inequality we investigate (Grodsky and Pager 2001).

Notably, the vast majority of women officials elected at the local level in rural Maharashtra are elected through quotas (Priebe 2017). Thus, we cannot disentangle the impact of women's electoral representation mandated via quotas from the impact of women's representation itself. What we learn about women's centrality in decision-making after quotas is likely to be, in part, informed by the politics of quota mandates, as they are the main channel for women's electoral representation in this context.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To test these hypotheses, we rely on surveys carried out in 2020 to 2021 in 320 village councils across three districts of Maharashtra. Appendix A details our sampling strategy. The data used for our main analyses draw from four interrelated instruments. The first is an interview of the president (*sarpanch*) of each council; we use this instrument to measure the *sarpanch*'s characteristics and her self-perceptions of centrality in the village council. The second targets six key informants in each village[2] and is used to generate several reputation-based measures of the *sarpanch*'s centrality. The third is an interview of the village bureaucrat (*gram sevak*), used to develop reputation-based measures of centrality and collect administrative data. The last instrument, described in appendix B, is

1. This would be true if discrimination occurred against officials with less experience, information, and networks, characteristics that women officials in some cases possess at higher levels than men (Cruz and Tolentino 2019; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010)

2. Interviews were balanced by gender and caste. Sampling strategy in appendix C.

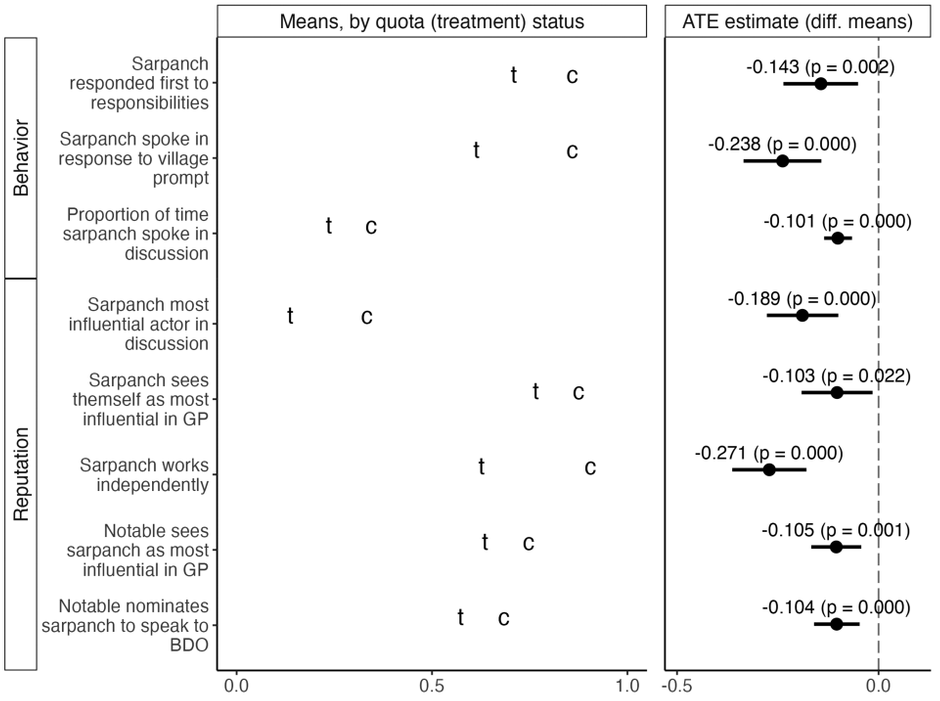

Figure 1. Evaluating the gender (quota) disadvantage. Means for treatment (t) *gram panchayats* (GPs) with gender quotas and control (c) without quotas on the left panel. Average treatment effects (ATE) estimates (via differences in means), 95% CIs (Neyman SEs), and *p* values on the right panel. Notable measures use GP-clustered SEs. Number of observations (N) = 320 GPs. The acronym BDO refers to the Block Development Officer, the prominent state bureaucrat who operates at the block level.

based on a standardized group discussion between the *sarpanch*, the council vice president (the *upa sarpanch*, an individual nominated among the elected council members), and the *gram sevak*. From this, we generate reputational and behavioral measures of the *sarpanch*'s centrality in actual decision-making. Overall, we rely on eight behavioral and reputational measures (described and justified in app. E) to assess the *sarpanch*'s centrality within the village council. These measures build on research showing the importance of voice and reputation for influence in deliberative bodies (Parthasarathy et al. 2019; Sanyal and Rao 2018).

Our analyses explore the effect of gender quotas that "reserve" the *sarpanch* seat for women on these measures of centrality in decision-making processes. We exploit the fact that gender quotas are randomly allocated for causal identification (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004) and show evidence of this in appendices D and J. In Maharashtra, half of village councils are randomly assigned to receive a gender quota for the president seat, with replacement, each electoral cycle (Priebe 2017). This enables us to estimate the causal impact of being a quota-elected female *sarpanch*, rather than a non-quota-elected (most often) male *sarpanch*, on centrality in decision-making. Our main tests compare average levels of centrality by the gender quota status of the *sarpanch*.

RESULTS

Figure 1 evaluates the gender (quota) disadvantage, with means by quota status displayed on the left panel and average treatment effect estimates on the right (all estimates in app. F). Note that all officials elected with gender quotas are women. Of the officials elected in the absence of quotas, 22.5% are women. Figure 1 presents striking evidence that *sarpanches* elected via quotas are less central to village council governance than their counterparts elected in nonquota seats. This is visible through both their participation in deliberation and elite recognition of their input. Behavioral and reputational measures of centrality align. Across all eight measures, *sarpanches* elected via quotas ("t" in fig. 1) are always on average significantly less central, or seen as less central, than *sarpanches* in the control group (nonquota seats, "c" in fig. 1). We detect a gender (quota) gap between 10 and 27 percentage points, depending on the measure.[3] These results clearly support our main hypothesis: Quota-elected women representatives do not, on average, enjoy an equal voice in decision-making processes within the institutions they are elected to lead,

3. We would expect social desirability bias to work in the direction of finding no effect, as respondents likely feel pressured to report that all *sarpanches* are indeed central.

Table 1. Bias and Tolerance for Interference among Local Political Actors

Actor	Outcome (Binary: 1/0)	Overall (SE)	Quota (SE)	Nonquota (SE)	*n*
Upa sarpanch (council vice president)	Women worse leader	.17	.19	.155	100
		(.378)	(.397)	(.365)	
	Interference accepted	.54	.571	.517	100
		(.501)	(.501)	(.504)	
	Not frowned upon	.433	.45	.421	97
		(.498)	(.504)	(.498)	
	Sanctions unlikely	.646	.548	.719	99
		(.48)	(.504)	(.453)	
Gram sevak (main village bureaucrat)	Women worse leader	.21	.19	.224	100
		(.409)	(.397)	(.421)	
	Interference accepted	.212	.262	.175	99
		(.411)	(.445)	(.384)	
	Not frowned upon	.388	.537	.281	98
		(.49)	(.505)	(.453)	
	Sanctions unlikely	.845	.805	.875	97
		(.363)	(.401)	(.334)	

Note. Means and standard errors for overall *gram panchayats* and by gender quota status of the elected head, including *gram panchayats* with quota-elected and nonquota-elected heads.

nor are they recognized as being equally central to decision-making by informants aware of council workings. This provides compelling evidence of gender quotas' causal impact on the *sarpanch*'s influence, given quotas' random assignment (see app. H and I for robustness tests).

As noted above, this gender gap may be driven by a variety of mechanisms. Selection effects and/or statistical discrimination may produce this gap. Appendix G.1.1 shows that quota-elected women are strikingly different from the predominantly male officials elected outside quotas. They are younger, less experienced, less educated, and less connected. Qualitative evidence also suggests that the characteristics of quota-elected *sarpanches* contribute, in multiple ways, to the gap we detect (app. G.1.2).

Other data however suggest that taste-based discrimination also contributes to these inequalities. While carefully testing this would require a different design, our data allows us to present important suggestive evidence. First, turning to interviews of the main actors in village politics (*gram sevak*, *upa sarpanch*[4]) in a subset of our data,[5] we show that these actors have biased opinions about the ability of all women—quota-elected or not—to serve as political leaders (Of the top elected and appointed officials asked "When comparing women and men, do you think women make better or poorer leaders?" about one fifth of these actors openly declare that women make worse leaders than men). We also ask these local elites to comment on local behavioral norms indicative of tolerance for interference.[6] Results in table 1 demonstrate that both bias and interference are widely tolerated and hence likely frequent. We see this as suggestive evidence of taste-based discrimination. We also show in appendix G.2 qualitative and quantitative evidence of discriminatory behaviors plausibly driven by biased gender attitudes rather than beliefs about quota-elected *sarpanches*' characteristics.

DISCUSSION

These analyses highlight a consequential yet underappreciated type of gendered political inequality. Combining eight

4. This is from our surveys of village council secretaries and vice presidents.

5. These items were asked in only one of the three districts sampled, hence the smaller *n*.

6. We ask three questions: "Is it socially acceptable for someone else to do the *sarpanch*'s work?"; "If other people do the work of the *sarpanch*, is this likely to be frowned upon by *gram panchayat* members?"; and finally, "If other people do the work of the *sarpanch*, is it likely that block or district level officials will sanction those individuals?"

behavioral and reputational measures of elected officials' voice and recognition in decision-making, we show that these inequalities are not merely subjective: Local elites' perceptions match the behaviors of elected *sarpanches*.

We show that these disadvantages likely owe to several reinforcing mechanisms. While it is true that quota-elected women have different characteristics, this is only part of the story. The inequalities we uncover cannot be purely blamed on differences in motivation or abilities (selection effects) or purely "statistical" discrimination. Rather, our quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests village elites harbor biased attitudes that credibly lead to discrimination against women officials on the basis of gender (app. G). The presence of statistical and taste-based discrimination coupled with the absence of sanctions for interference likely drives inequalities among elected officials.

We complement existing work that documents the disadvantages individuals from marginalized groups face prior to elections (Bernhard et al. 2021; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Schlozman et al. 2001). We find that social exclusion does not stop at the doorstep of political office. This likely prevents elected members of disadvantaged groups from influencing governance. Our research suggests social exclusion postelection severs the potential link between descriptive and substantive representation: Without voice and centrality in elected office, we cannot expect marginalized politicians to advance policies that benefit their groups. This may also exert a chilling effect on broader political engagement by members of disadvantaged groups, reinforcing potential fears about their political inefficacy (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Mansbridge 1999).

Social scientists and policymakers should acknowledge this underappreciated form of political inequality to more comprehensively understand the impact of descriptive representation. The gender of officials may be more consequential than has so far been acknowledged if women play—by force or by choice—a less central role in decision-making. This also suggests that quotas may not suffice to enable women to have an equal say in policy. Complementary interventions to help women overcome disadvantages in political experience and networks are likely necessary. So are sanctions against elites who appropriate women representatives' roles. These additional steps are likely important to ensure that gender quotas generate substantive change.

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