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Gender quotas in development programming: Null results from a field experiment in Congo[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We examine whether gender quotas introduced by development agencies empower women. As part of a development program, an international organization created community management committees in 661 villages to oversee village level program expenditures. In a randomly selected half of these villages the organization required the committees to have gender parity. Using data on project choice from all participating villages, data on decision making in a later development project (105 villages), and data on citizen attitudes (200 villages), we find no evidence that gender parity requirements empower women. We discuss potential reasons for the null result, including weakness of these social interventions in terms of the engagement they generate, their time horizon, and the weak delegation of responsibilities.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, there have been many legal reforms aimed at improving the position of women by increasing their political power in the public sphere. Gender quotas are prominent among them. Half of the countries nowadays use some type of electoral quota for their parliament.¹ The core idea behind such quotas is to recruit women into positions of leadership and to ensure that women have influence over decision making processes, advancing representation and possibly producing downstream effects on attitudes towards women and their influence in other political fora. A considerable literature suggests that gender quotas can lead to changes in the type of public goods provided (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004), the role of women in the community and attitudes towards them (Beaman et al., 2012; Bhavnani, 2009). This literature has largely focused on the impact of legal reforms — reserved seats, legal candidate quotas, and political party quotas — implemented

by governments. However, there is no guarantee that similar results will obtain if gender parity is introduced through other means, such as development organizations who lack the legal leverage but are often the only vehicle for social change when the state is weak (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). In this study, we explore the effects of gender quotas imposed by foreign development organizations in small rural communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).²

There are a number of reasons to expand the focus beyond the use of legal gender quota reforms to similar institutional innovations implemented by development agencies.

First, gender quotas are a popular tool in development programming. That is, the optimism around the impact of gender quotas has shaped development practice and women's roles and rights are now a central component to many development programs. For example, since the 1990s, “participatory development,” and community-driven development (CDD) programs in particular, has become a favored model for

[☆] Data is publicly available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/BSASJR>.

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¹ Source: <http://www.quotaproject.org/>.

² By women's empowerment we refer broadly to women's ability to influence the allocation of resources that are relevant for their well-being. This is broadly consistent with definitions given in Kaber (2000) and Narayan-Parker (2002) though more focused on collective decision making. More precise operationalizations are introduced below.

development.³ As part of these programs, development agencies very often mandate some sort of women's participation. The GoBifo program in Sierra Leone (studied by e.g. Casey et al. (2013)) required that one of the three co-signatories on the community bank account be female; encouraged women to manage their own projects; made evidence of inclusion in project implementation a prerequisite for the release of funding branches; and required field staff to record how many women and youth attended and spoke up in meetings. The NSP program in Afghanistan (studied by e.g. Beath et al. (2013)) established gender-balanced village development councils, mandated involvement of women in council elections and in the selection of village development projects, as well as the implementation of at least one project that should specifically benefit women.⁴

A second reason to focus on gender parity provisions introduced by development actors is that they are often the actors most likely to promote such innovations. In many developing countries — including many in which issues related to women's empowerment are salient — the reach of the government is limited. Many state functions are undertaken by development agencies and it are these actors that are often most likely to implement public projects at scale. In these contexts, development actors may thus control the practical mechanisms to undertake activities to improve the role of women.

Finally, while development actors may be the actors most likely to apply these innovations, the lessons from the experiences of government actors may not extend to them. Points of difference include the legitimacy that they enjoy — which may be greater or less than the state's in different contexts. Another difference is that the innovations they introduce may be less structural in nature. Quotas studied in other contexts often focus on reforms to existing formal, long-lived, electoral institutions. In contrast, development actors often create new, short-lived, parallel institutions — for example a committee with gender parity that manages the implementation of a development project — that may not enjoy the institutional strength needed to impose meaningful constraints on actual decision making.⁵ We return to these and other differences below when we discuss differences in our findings compared to the existing literature.

To assess the impact of gender quotas implemented by external development actors on women's empowerment, we build on a field experiment that was implemented between 2007 and 2010 in 661 communities in the DRC. As part of a CDD program, communities participated in elections to select ten-member management committees, which were responsible for overseeing a development project of \$3000 in their community.⁶ In a randomly selected half of the villages, the committees were required to contain five men and five women. In the other half, the communities were free to choose the committee's gender composition. The random allocation of gender parity requirements allows us to assess the causal impact of development agencies' efforts to place women in leadership positions on the subsequent empowerment of women.

We explore the impact of promoting women's access to leadership positions across three outcomes. First, we use project records collected by our implementing partner across all 661 villages to learn about project selection for the CDD program. Second, we examine project selection and the position of women in the community after the program. To measure these downstream effects, we introduced an independent, unconditional cash transfer intervention implemented by local

universities in a random sample of the parity and non-parity areas after the field experiment. Selected communities (one village in each cluster of villages, selected proportionate to size) received \$1,000, which they could manage without conditions or oversight over a two month period. Comparing differences in implementation of this program between parity and non-parity communities (Were different projects selected? Did women take leading roles in managing the \$1000?), allows us to measure decisions on public goods provision and actual behavior related to women's role in their community. Finally, we build on data on citizen attitudes to learn about individuals' attitudes towards women.

Across a range of measures we find no evidence that promoting women's access to leadership positions has an effect on women's empowerment. The intervention did not lead to clear changes in the type of public goods provided during the program. We also find no evidence of effects on project selection and the position of women in the community after the program. There is also no evidence that the treatment led to different attitudes towards women regarding their role in the community. The coefficient sizes that we find are small. For instance, one of the strongest results suggests that the gender quota increases the share of women that were a member in a later development project committee by 1.7 percentage points from a baseline of 22 percent. Many coefficients also point in the opposite direction of what was expected. We further discuss whether the null result stems from differences in context or differences in the nature of the intervention, relative to successful cases elsewhere. Finally, the lack of average effects on project choice is likely due to the fact that there are few differences in self-reported project preferences between women and men at baseline. Yet supplementary analysis suggests that even when these differences do exist, women's preferences are not more likely to prevail in treated areas.

Evidence from this case and elsewhere suggests that differences may be attributable to the relative weakness of social interventions by development organizations in terms of levels of engagement, duration of interventions, and delegation of decision making responsibility. As noted, the positive evidence related to gender quotas to date is largely drawn from cases where these innovations were introduced by governments using legal reforms to existing institutions. These findings have inspired development practitioners who seek to introduce similar changes through similar institutional innovations. Our null findings from Congo highlight the challenge of drawing inferences across cases on the effects of very different types of institutional reforms for tackling gender inequality.

In the next section we introduce previous work related to gender quotas. Section 3 anchors this study in the Congolese context, describing both the position of women and pre-existing decision making structures. Section 4 discusses the field experiment and measurement strategy. Section 5 presents the results. We discuss our results in Section 6, and conclude in Section 7.

2. Previous work on women in leadership positions

The literature to date has largely built on the case of India to learn about the impact of gender quotas. In 1992, a constitutional amendment was adopted in India that mandated that one-third of all seats on village councils (GPs) and a third of all presidencies of these councils be reserved for women. Many states randomly rotate the council seats and presidencies reserved for women, which allowed researchers to make causal claims about this policy. A first set of studies explores how this reform affects policy choices.⁷ Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) compare reserved and unreserved village councils in India's West Bengal and Rajasthan, and find that having women in leadership positions leads to more investment in public goods in sectors in which women

³ Mansuri and Rao (2013) quote a figure of \$85bn in World Bank spending in the last decade alone on this broad class of interventions.

⁴ As the World Bank's IEG (2016, p.5) writes, "By giving voice to women, CDD provides an opportunity for women to influence local decisions so that they more closely reflect their preferences and their needs, as stressed by the recent World Bank Group Gender Strategy (World Bank, 2015)."

⁵ See Murphy (1990) for a classic account of how "backstage" decision making process can diverge from what seems apparent given "frontstage" institutional structures.

⁶ US\$3000 is a large sum in these villages, where most citizens are subsistence farmers and the economy is largely unmonetized.

⁷ Possibly resulting from differences in underlying policy preferences (e.g. Inglehart and Norris (2000); Edlund and Pande (2002); Paxton et al. (2007)).

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