



Is women's empowerment associated with political knowledge and opinions? Evidence from rural Mali

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ABSTRACT

According to many prominent theorists of democracy, citizens must be able to “formulate and signify preferences” to participate as ‘political equals’ for democracy to work (Dahl, 1971). However, a gender gap in political knowledge and opinions exists across the Global South, especially in rural areas. In this paper, we study the relationship between rural women’s socioeconomic empowerment (household agency and mobility outside the village) and political knowledge and opinions in Mali, a West African country with patriarchal gender norms. To reduce well-known difficulties of gaining access to rural women and reducing bystander effects, we use simultaneous co-gender interviews of one man and one woman per extended family household and a modified Audio-Self-Administered Questionnaire for illiterate populations. Further to reduce “satisfied” opinions, we elicit opinion justifications and measure “justified opinions.” Consistent with predictions, we find that women’s empowerment is positively associated with rural women’s political knowledge and opinions. We close by examining opinions towards one controversial policy area with redistributive consequences for men and women—the Family Code, which regulates rights of men and women in marriage, inheritance, and the family. More empowered women are more likely to support pro-woman changes.

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Political knowledge and opinions are foundational building blocks for informed and autonomous political participation in a democracy (Dahl, 1971). Troublingly, a systematic gender gap pervades the Global South in levels of political knowledge and opinions, especially in rural areas (Chhibber, 2002; Logan & Bratton, 2006). Given men and women often have different policy priorities and preferences (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Gottlieb, Grossman, & Robinson, 2016), such gender gaps in knowledge and opinions may hinder women’s ability to participate and influence the political process in line with their interests. It is therefore crucial to understand the determinants of improved levels of women’s political knowledge and opinions.

A large literature emphasizes how women’s degree of political engagement depends critically on gender inequalities in socioeconomic resources that stem from differential access to education, formal employment, and participation in civil society (Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Isaksson, 2014; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010, 2006, 2008; Kuenzi, 2006; Logan & Bratton, 2006). However, a large gender gap remains even when controlling

for such socioeconomic resources, especially in the Global South (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011; Isaksson, Kotsadam, & Nerman, 2014; Jayachandran, 2015; Logan & Bratton, 2006). Many scholars (e.g., Clayton, 2015; Gottlieb, 2016; Logan & Bratton, 2006) suggest that this unexplained gender gap is due, at least in part, to pervasive patriarchal norms governing socioeconomic spheres of life. Indeed, qualitative studies have documented how patriarchal norms curtailing women’s socioeconomic empowerment inhibit women’s ability to develop political knowledge and opinions, and ultimately full and autonomous political participation (Armstrong et al., 1993; Beck, 2003; Callaway, 1984; Tripp, 2012). Of course, lack of women’s autonomous political participation mutually reinforces socioeconomic gender inequalities given that pro-woman policies are less likely to be enacted when women’s voices do not enter politics (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2013).

In this study, we quantitatively examine whether the degree of rural women’s socioeconomic empowerment is positively associated with greater political knowledge and opinion formation in the lead up to the 2012 Malian presidential elections. We argue that such a correlation may exist due to higher levels of decision-making, discussion, and pro-woman household norms (“household agency”) as well as travel outside the village. These factors mutually reinforce political efficacy, interest, and skills to learn about

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and engage with the political world around them. In the study area, individuals have little access to schooling, formal employment, and information communication technology. Thus, we examine variation in the degree of women's household agency and mobility outside the village holding such factors constant when they might ordinarily confound such a study.

We conduct an original survey in 10 villages, employing new survey sampling and questionnaire techniques developed with villagers in an out-of-sample village. We employed co-gender enumerators and interviewed one man and one woman per *du* (extended family household) simultaneously to overcome inhibited access and common bystander effects to surveying female respondents (the latter of which we show in Afrobarometer data) (Lupu & Michelitch, 2018). Further, we adapt (Chauchard, 2013)'s Audio-Self-Administered Questionnaire for illiterate populations to further provide privacy on potentially sensitive questions. We measure political knowledge and opinions regarding three dimensions that were salient for the upcoming presidential elections¹: presidential term limits, a local elected official's identity and performance, and the Family Code (a policy issue with redistributive implications for each sex). To avoid falsely counting "satisficing"² as an opinion, we use follow-up prompts in the questionnaire to differentiate between those offering an opinion from those who can offer an opinion and a justification of that opinion. Last, to measure women's socioeconomic empowerment, we join international development scholars in collecting data on women's household agency (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005) as well as mobility outside the village (Chhibber, 2002).

The findings largely support the hypotheses. As predicted, women's household agency and mobility outside the village are both positively associated with rural women's political knowledge and opinions. We then examine the content of political opinions to see whether socioeconomic empowerment is associated with support for pro-woman changes in the Family Code, a proposed law that would regulate citizen's rights and responsibilities within a marriage, inheritance, and the family. The changes were very contentious and there was mass mobilization against the code by the religious community in Mali. Changes like those in the Family Code (e.g., minimum woman's age of marriage), have been hotly debated across Francophone West Africa (Wing, 2009). Encouragingly, we find that more empowered women are more likely to support the Family Code, which includes many pro-woman provisions that would feed back into women's basic *de jure* (and *de facto*) empowerment if adopted and implemented.

This paper contributes to existing substantive knowledge of gender and development in two main ways. First, while most studies examine the relationship between women's socioeconomic empowerment with socioeconomic outcomes (e.g., Furuta & Salway, 2006; Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005), our study joins the few other studies examining a systematic statistical link between women's socioeconomic empowerment and political outcomes (e.g., Chhibber, 2002; Gottlieb & Robinson, 2016; Girard, 2014; Prillaman, 2016). These latter studies demonstrate how socioeconomic empowerment, access to economic networks, or matrilineal lineage is associated with higher levels of women's political participation (e.g. candidacy, contacting an official, voter

turnout). We complement such research by demonstrating a positive relationship between women's socioeconomic empowerment and political *knowledge and opinions*.

Women's level of political knowledge and opinions should not be overlooked because these are the foundational tools women need for *autonomous* participation rather than simply *mobilized* participation (Collier, 1982). Indeed, high levels of rural women's (and men's) political participation in elections is often mobilized by chiefs or religious leaders looking to trade the maximum number of votes to political parties in return for patronage (Baldwin, 2015; Gottlieb & Larreguy, 2016; Koter, 2016), while otherwise excluding women from politics (Gottlieb, 2016). Further, the government and the international aid community often require women's participation in political processes in exchange for public services, but such mobilized participation has shown mixed results in affecting women's empowerment outside the mandated activities (Beath et al., 2013). More research is necessary to understand the conditions under which rural women can participate more and be truly autonomous.

Second, many scholars have highlighted the large strides made by women in low-income countries. For example, scholars have investigated the enactment of legislative gender quotas (Tripp & Kang, 2008), the success of women's movements in influencing policy (e.g., (Adams & Kang, 2007; Bauer, 2004; Kang, 2016)), factors associated with women's appointment to high-level positions (Arriola & Johnson, 2014; Tripp, 2015), and the impact of women's descriptive representation on broader participation (Barnes & Burchard, 2013). However, these narratives are by and large focused on urban and/or more elite women. Our study cautions that, amidst celebration of women's recent successes in the political sphere, we should simultaneously acknowledge that rural women still face significant barriers to entering the political sphere with the basic building blocks of autonomous political participation—political knowledge and opinions. Encouragingly, however, we show that small variation in levels of household agency and mobility outside the village in a context of fairly strict patriarchal gender norms is associated with greater knowledge and opinion formation. Moreover, women with higher levels of empowerment are more likely to support pro-woman changes to formal political law that would act to further empower women in what may be the start of a virtuous cycle of women's empowerment. Practitioners and scholars should put efforts into further discovery into how to begin and accelerate such a virtuous cycle.

1. Previous scholarship

An extensive quantitative literature emphasizes how women's degree of political engagement *writ large* depends critically on private sphere barriers, with emphasis on inequalities in socioeconomic resources (e.g., civic skills, money, political interest) that stem from schooling, formal employment, religion, civil society organizations, and family life (Burns et al., 2001; Isaksson, 2014; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010, 2006, 2008; Kuenzi, 2006; Logan & Bratton, 2006). However, a large gender gap in political engagement remains even when controlling for available socioeconomic resources, especially in low-income countries characterized by unequal gender norms (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011; Isaksson et al., 2014; Logan & Bratton, 2006; Jayachandran, 2015). Scholars (e.g., (Clayton, 2015; Gottlieb, 2016; Logan & Bratton, 2006)) suggest that this unexplained gender gap is due to pervasive patriarchal norms at the village and household level regarding the role of women in socioeconomic spheres of life, which inhibits women's political engage-

¹ The election was cancelled due to a military coup two months after the survey.

² "Satisficing" is when respondents offer up responses that seem reasonable enough, but are not truthful or complete (Krosnick, Narayan, & Smith, 1996). This technique shows a large disparity in the number of people who *report a response* to an opinion question (e.g., how well the mayor is performing) and the number who *report a response and state any reason at all* when asked why (e.g., he does nothing for agriculture).

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