



Why Might Information Exacerbate the Gender Gap in Civic Participation? Evidence from Mali

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Summary. — Civic engagement fails to foster democratic representation when women or other marginalized groups face barriers to participation, as they do in many societies. Rather than flattening civic participation, a randomly assigned civic education course in Mali widened the gender gap when it increased civic activity among men while decreasing it among women. Qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews reveal mechanisms by which the intervention generated these perverse consequences for women. In a place where women are traditionally unwelcome actors in the public sphere, female participation in the course constituted deviation from a pre-existing social norm. As compensation, women self-impose limits to future civic participation and men erect new barriers as a form of backlash. These findings are consistent with the “resource paradox” described in the literature in which increasing resources among women can yield negative outcomes when asymmetric or gendered social norms neutralize, or even invert, whatever benefits the resource confers on the woman. The civics intervention did, however, work to improve civic and political knowledge for men and women. Together, these findings suggest that resource constraints limit civic participation, but increasing informational resources cannot overcome discriminatory gender norms—and may even exacerbate them. One implication of the study is that future participatory interventions like this one should be more attuned to the social constraints faced by women and other marginalized groups to both avoid setting untenable expectation and anticipate reactions to breaches of the status quo.
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Key words — civic participation, field experiments, gender, information, Africa, Mali

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite increasingly egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles, there remains a substantial gender gap in civic participation worldwide, largest among agrarian societies (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1993). Well-known determinants of civic participation at the individual level—education and socio-economic status—fail to account for why women participate less than men (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). And there is little evidence explaining the gender gap in civic participation, particularly in developing societies where the problem is most severe. This study generates micro-level data, both quantitative and qualitative, from one developing society that documents a perverse effect of a civic information intervention on the existing gender gap in civic participation and generates explanations for why. Unpacking the mechanisms underlying this unintended effect informs our understanding of the prevalent gender gap in civic participation, and what can and cannot be done to close it.

A large-scale field experiment in Mali forms the basis of the study. Originally designed to examine the impact of providing civic information on voter behavior (Gottlieb, 2016), the civics intervention did not have an overt gender component, though men and women participated in the course at nearly equal rates. This allows us to examine the following puzzle: will positive impacts from such an intervention accrue equally to both women and men, or will pre-existing gender norms result in a differential effect? There is support in the literature for both outcomes. A long literature substantiates the relationship between civic information and civic participation, and finds impacts on both genders (Galston, 2001; Verba *et al.*, 1997). Specifically in the African context, Grossman, Humphreys, and Sacramone-Lutz (2014) find that reducing resource costs through information technology can flatten gender disparities in participation. On the other hand, a review of USAID programs finds that encouraging gender equality through civic

education interventions unintentionally reinforces gender disparities in the political realm (USAID, 2002). In similar types of participatory programs in India and Uganda, Cornwall (2003) discusses how programs intended to be inclusive instead exacerbate gender norms or reinforce male bias.¹

I find that asymmetric gender norms are sufficiently strong in the Malian context that they prevent women from enjoying the benefits of having participated in the civics intervention. What’s worse, course participation appears to have a perverse (rather than a null) effect on women. While the course substantially increased civic participation among men, it decreased it among women. The quantitative data generated by logging civic activity of men and women in treatment and control groups in the months following the experimentally assigned intervention allow us to rigorously identify this phenomenon. I then draw on qualitative data to explain the mechanisms producing these results. Interviews and focus groups with male and female participants demonstrate that rural Mali is a place where women are traditionally unwelcome actors in the public sphere. Female participation in the course constituted a deviation from this norm, thus increasing social costs to future civic engagement among women. Examining inter-village

* I am grateful to the National Science Foundation, the International Growth Centre, the Freeman Spogli Institute, and Stanford University for financial support. I thank James Fearon, Jeremy Weinstein, Saumitra Jha, Katherine Casey, Beatriz Magaloni, Bernd Beber, Mariela Szwarcberg, Kristin Michelitch, Amanda Robinson, Eric Kramon, Guy Grossman, Rachel Glennerster, and members of the Midwest Working Group on African Political Economy for comments on earlier drafts. This research would not have been possible without the research assistance of Sidi Zeda and Peter LeFrancois as well as the Malian instructors and enumerators. All errors are my own. Final revision accepted: May 18, 2016.

differences, I find some evidence that the effect is worse where gender norms are strongest: in less urbanized and more traditional communities.

The perverse consequence documented in this study is consistent with what [Mabsout and Van Staveren \(2010\)](#) call the “resource paradox,” or a phenomenon in which increasing women’s access to individual resources decreases rather than increases their bargaining outcomes. Such an outcome arises when gendered institutions or asymmetric social norms ([Van & Odeboode, 2007](#)) overwhelm whatever benefits the resource confers on the woman. Resources, such as information or money, are expected to improve outcomes for women not only by increasing their social or economic status or opportunities, but also by increasing their bargaining power ([Agarwal, 1994](#); [Quisumbing, 2003](#)). However, asymmetric gender norms may neutralize this advantage “by affecting their exit options, their bargaining agency, for example, accepting male authority when they have formally equal rights, their preferences, through adapting these to what is deemed proper for women, and their roles in the household, limiting what can and what cannot be bargained over” ([Mabsout & Van Staveren, 2010](#)). A negative, rather than neutral, effect can prevail when women compensate for the deviation from social norms (wrought by the relative improvement in resources) by being more strictly bound by those same norms. The randomly assigned civics intervention produces support for the resource paradox with its finding that increasing access to civic information and skills not only failed to close the gender gap but widened it. The qualitative data collected following the intervention suggest that, indeed, female participants deviated from an asymmetric norm against women’s participation in the public sphere, and as compensation, constraints to future participation were both self-imposed by women, and erected by men.

The implications of these findings are nuanced. Information deficits *did* pose a constraint to civic participation among men which were rectified, at least in part, by a civic education intervention. And, it is not the case that women failed to gain anything from the civics course either. Women’s civic and political knowledge improved significantly with treatment. The fact that these changes in knowledge and attitudes did not translate into changes in civic behavior for women as it did for men suggests that pre-existing gender norms rather than disparities in knowledge and skills are the binding constraint on female participation. While women may reap some benefit from improved civic skills and knowledge, closing the gender gap in civic participation requires the harder and longer work of changing gender norms.

This work adds to a growing evidence base on gender (in)equality in local development. Formally mandating female participation has been shown to improve gender equality in politics. In Afghanistan, requiring involvement of women in local elections and on village councils more than superficially increases female participation in local governance and has a demonstration effect of making women’s political participation more acceptable ([Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2013](#)). Similarly, electoral quotas in India continue to elicit greater female political and economic participation after they are withdrawn ([Bhavnani, 2009](#); [Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004](#)). And a cross-country study on the African continent finds support for the idea that increasing representation of women in elected positions decreases gender disparity in political participation ([Barnes & Burchard, 2013](#)). However, gender norms are not quickly or easily transformed and can undermine egalitarian institutions as I find in Mali. In India, men still evaluate female politicians unfavorably due to strong distaste for female leadership (as opposed to poor performance)

([Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2009](#)); in China, women frequently have their ballots cast or filled out by others without their consultation ([Rozelle & Pang, 2006](#)); and even globally, when women are granted access to powerful political positions such as cabinet posts, these are far more likely to be in less prestigious sociocultural ministries than in those dealing with the economy or foreign policy ([Reynolds, 1999](#)).

This article additionally makes theoretical and methodological contributions to the literature on information and civic participation. While several existing studies have identified a conditional effect of information on civic participation by gender ([Finkel, Sabatini, & Bevis, 2000](#); [USAID, 2002](#)), I contribute theoretical intuition and explore mechanisms underlying the gendered impact of civic education. Previous studies attempt to address endogeneity problems of identifying the effect of information on civic behavior by controlling for confounding participant attributes ([Bratton, Alderfer, Bowser, & Temba, 1999](#); [Finkel, 2002](#)), but are still subject to bias from unobservable factors which an experimental design overcomes. Further, I demonstrate the utility of a novel measurement instrument—an event register—that I show produces more valid measures of civic participation than standard survey questions.

Finally, the findings of this paper raise an important ethical dilemma. While there are normative reasons ([Hill & Matsubayashi, 2005](#)) to want to encourage what Putnam would call “bridging social capital” in the interest of increasing democratic representation, there may also be important costs. The potentially perverse consequences of community-level programs that involve mixed gender participation highlight the need for more discussion across disciplines about how to avoid exacerbating female exclusion in male-dominated societies. The answer is not simple; as Cornwall suggests, there is often a tension between promoting women and supporting the poorest of the poor.

2. GENDER, CIVIC PARTICIPATION, AND THE MALIAN CONTEXT

I define civic participation as citizen engagement in public affairs with the aim of improving public life or influencing government policy. Political participation—the act of directly engaging in politics through party activity, electoral campaigns, or serving in public office—is a subset of civic participation. While studies in American politics often focus on political participation ([Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995](#); [Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & DelliCarpini, 2006](#)), a broader definition of civic participation is more appropriate in a developing country context. Where political parties are weak and disorganized, electoral campaigns focused on patronage rather than policy issues, and formal channels of contacting public officials rare or ineffectual, political participation narrowly defined is a less useful avenue through which citizens can affect policy outcomes. Instead, organizing with other community members outside of formal political organizations can be a more effective way to pressure politicians or voice public opinion. In addition to the greater relevance of civic than political participation in a developing society, new evidence shows a greater gender gap in the former than the latter ([Isaksson, Kotsadam, & Nerman, 2014](#)).

There is a consistently large gender gap in civic participation across the African continent. [Figure 1](#) plots the difference in an index of civic participation between men and women using the last three rounds of Afrobarometer data.² While the direction

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