

Stepping into Formal Politics

Women's Engagement in Formal Political Processes in Irrigation in Rural India

ALEXANDRA M. GIRARD*
University of Oxford, UK

Summary. — Gender quotas, decentralization of irrigation management, and reliance on MGNREGA for labor provision challenge the traditional patriarchal canal management system by institutionalizing women as formal decision-makers and members of the irrigation labor force in northern India. Based on a survey of 592 women in rural Himachal Pradesh, this paper quantitatively analyses how these policies affect women's engagement in formal political processes. Results indicate that factors from the private and individual domains influence female participation in formal political processes. Most importantly, India's gender inclusive policies provide women with the opportunity to legitimately engage in formal political processes governing resource management.
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Key words — women, political participation, MGNREGA, irrigation, India, South Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

Women often use informal means to influence political actions and learn about political issues in their community: they talk to wives of political representatives, share their opinion with more outspoken women, or simply remain silent during meetings to communicate disagreements (Cleaver, 2001; Jackson, 2012). These informal political channels have often led to an erroneous perception of women as apolitical. Indeed, in the widely accepted idea of democratization, politics happen through *formal* systems of participation. Attending public meetings and engaging in public speeches are seen as clear indications of political interest and engagement. However, women often lack the tools and political resources to engage in formal participatory processes (Jackson, 2012; Lowndes, 2004; Sapiro, 1981; Togeby, 1994). In northern India, patriarchal governance and natural resource management norms traditionally exclude women from formal decision-making and the labor force in their community (Alesina, Giuliano, & Nunn, 2011; Pai, 1987). In particular, kuhl, irrigation canals that transport water from the Himalaya to the lower fertile lands, are traditionally governed by men. Men make formal decisions regarding irrigation and kuhl maintenance while women work on their land and households (Baker, 2005). Recently, however, rural policies, such as decentralization, poverty reduction schemes, and gender parity laws, have altered agriculture and irrigation management practices in northern India. Specifically, institutional interventions aimed at democratizing kuhl systems are challenging gender norms, integrating women into formal canal management as policy-makers and laborers.

The 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) in particular has led to changes in irrigation management in northern India. MGNREGA, in line with theories emphasizing the link between agricultural growth and poverty reduction (Ashley & Maxwell, 2001), provides poor households an opportunity to work for 100 days on projects to improve soil and water quality. MGNREGA has a gender quota dictating that 33% of beneficiaries must be female, triggering female engagement in traditionally male labor. While women were always vital in rural labor, their agricultural involvement is often

portrayed as an extension of their domestic duties (Rao, 2012). In plough cultures, like those in northern India, gender norms often restrict the engagement of women in non-domestic labor (Alesina *et al.*, 2011; Boserup, 1970). Women usually engage in self-employment in their farms and few are actually paid—those paid receiving a significantly lower wage than men (Abraham, 2009; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2010). Thus, the conceptual distinction between women who provide for the household and those who sell agrarian goods is often blurry (Dixon, 1982, 1983). By contrast, the introduction of the scheme brings women into the world of formalized and equalitarian labor force participation, with equal wages between men and women, official registration and contracts, opening of bank accounts, and benefits such as payment for the non-provision of requested work or free access to crèches. MGNREGA provides a rare opportunity to assess the impact of formal paid employment on formal political participation by creating a clear distinction between women who are *formally* economically active and those who are not.

Furthermore, MGNREGA is decentralized and empowers the Panchayat Raj Institutes (PRIs, local governance institutions), in conjunction with villagers, to decide which assets to develop during an annual public meeting (*Gram Sabhas*, GS). Because PRIs abide by the 1992 Reservation Law, whereby women must occupy 33–50% of seats and 33% of PRIs are reserved for a female chair (locally *pradhan*), MGNREGA institutionalizes both female politicians and villagers as formal decision-makers in natural resource management.

Finally, MGNREGA is now linked with kuhl management. While some kuhl have remained under traditional farmer-management, others were acquired by the state in the 1980s

*This paper forms part of my DPhil thesis. I thank my supervisor Dr. Robert Hope for his useful guidance and encouragements. I also thank Mrs. Julie Baum as well as the three anonymous reviewers from *World Development* for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. The research received the generous technical support of many people in Himachal Pradesh, I am thankful to them all, and particularly to Mrs. Sheetal Saphehia and Mr. Naveen Chauhan. Final revision accepted: November 14, 2013.

and their management transferred to the Department of Public Health and Irrigation (IPH). In state-owned kuhl, this signaled the disappearance of a farmer led management labor force. However, in accordance with recent discourse on decentralization and participatory approaches (Dethier & Effenberger, 2012; Irz, Lin, Thirtle, & Wiggins, 2001; Meinzen-Dick, Raju, & Gulati, 2002), IPH is increasingly empowering PRIs from state-managed kuhl to maintain and develop the irrigation system, encouraging replacement of the lost labor force with MGNREGA workers (Executive Engineer for IPH, personal communication).

These interweaving factors create new irrigation management systems in northern India where the presence of women in traditionally masculine formal decision-making and labor participation is institutionalized. This raises the following question: does formalizing women as decision-makers (in PRIs) and the labor force (in MGNREGA) in irrigation management alter how rural women engage in formal political processes? “Formal political processes” refers to political engagement through formal channels, such as attending GSs or contributing to public discussions during GSs. In this paper, I hypothesize that institutionalizing women as formal irrigation policy-makers and the management labor force in northern India erodes existing gender norms and facilitates the engagement of women’s agency in formal political processes. To test this hypothesis, this study, based on a survey of 600 female canal users in the valley of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh (HP), examines women’s attendance at GSs and oral participation during meetings. Half of the women received water from a traditionally male managed and maintained canal while the other half received it from a state-owned canal, with management responsibility decentralized to gendered-balance PRIs and maintenance increasingly relying on MGNREGA labor force. To account for the diverse factors shaping women’s role in irrigation in northern India, this research tests variables from the public, private, and individual domains. The public domain refers to the formal and informal aspects of the political and labor institution in irrigation management. While policies bring change to the public realm, not all women behave alike under similar circumstances and the private domain can support or constrain women’s engagement in formal politics (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Mohanty, 2012; Prokopy, 2004). The private domain therefore reflects socializing factors—factors determining an individual’s knowledge, social interaction, values which define their social role and function—such as livelihood, family background, social status, and education which can influence how women engage in formal politics (Carroll, 1989; Chhibber, 2002). Finally, the individual domain refers to personal or ideological factors, such as the inclination to challenge gender norms or perception of political objectives and outcomes as relevant, which can shape how women identify their role in formal politics (Andersen, 1975; Klein, 1984 in Banaszak & Leighley, 1991).

The three domains and their relevance to female formal political participation are examined in an in-depth review of existing literature in the following section. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 3 sets the study within the context of northern India; Section 4 describes the methodology chosen to test the research hypothesis; Section 5 presents and discusses the results; and finally Section 6 delivers concluding remarks.

2. WOMEN AND FORMAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

There is a large pool of literature on women’s engagement in formal political processes from socio-anthropological studies

in developed countries. While these may not precisely characterize developing countries, due to cultural and geographical differences, gender asymmetry in public spaces and female exclusion from formal politics is almost universally observed (Jackson, 2012; Rosaldo, 2009). Reasons for this asymmetry are increasingly associated with the socio-political domain rather than the typical biological arguments¹ (Rosaldo, 2009). In the West during the 20th C., quickly changing socio-political contexts such as women’s suffrage and the rapid feminization of labor (a consequence of losses in male labor during wars) provided unique analytical platforms for studies on the causes of changing patterns in female engagement in formal political processes. This literature, together with studies from the developing world, enhance understanding on how, in rural India, similar changes in the public domain, combined with socializing factors from the private domain and political predispositions from the individual domain, shape women’s engagement in formal political processes.

(a) *Changes in the public domain*

(i) *Formalization of political processes and political representation*

In both developed and developing countries traditional assumptions previously asserted that women are unaffected by political changes, since they belong to the private sphere. However, many have challenged these ideas, contending that political matters affect women in society (Carroll, 1989; Jennings, 1979). Yet there is clear evidence that women struggle to integrate with the formal political system (Jackson, 2012; Togeby, 1994). Governance is presumed to be men’s responsibility and women are not expected to feel the need to attend public meetings and confront traditional customs (Prokopy, 2004). Women are associated with social capital, rooted in informal connections and notions of trust and mutuality, through which they informally influence politics (Lowndes, 2004). Regarding oral participation at public meetings, women often choose informal interactions, such as expressing disagreement through silence or relying on male relatives or older women to speak on their behalf (Clever, 2001; Jackson, 2012). It is generally assumed that women reject forced engagement in formal politics, and the more formal a political process is, the less likely women will participate (Lowndes, 2004).

Some scholars have suggested that enforcing democratic voting systems is a prerequisite for active and continuous engagement in formal politics (Franklin, 2004; Lijphart, 1997). However, a survey in North India found that despite the vast majority of women having voted in local elections there was little evidence of subsequent political engagement (Dube, 2013). Other studies have suggested that one effective way of making political processes less intimidating to women is to impose female representation in governance systems (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Deininger, Jin, & Nagarajan, 2011). Female politicians can bridge the gap between women’s informal political methods and the formal political world. Additionally, female representatives serve as role models, giving women confidence to engage in the masculine domain of politics (Oswald, 2008). Some women take pride in the political careers of other women, leading to more favorable views of formal politics and increased levels of female participation (High-Pippert & Comer, 1998). In India, however, the introduction of a female quota has resulted in contradictory outcomes regarding female participation. While Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) and Deininger *et al.* (2011) found that more women attended GSs in reserved PRIs, Campa (2011) suggested that female representation is insufficient to increase

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