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Does Women's Proportional Strength Affect their Participation? Governing Local Forests in South Asia

BINA AGARWAL *
Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University, India

Summary. — The gender and politics literature has long debated how women's proportional strength affects policy formulation within legislatures. Studies on gender and environmental governance have focused mainly on women's limited participation in local institutions. Both bodies of work leave important aspects unexplored. The former neglects the *in-between process* — the impact of women's numbers on their effective participation, such as attending and speaking up at meetings, and holding office. The latter neglects to ask: what impact would increasing women's proportions have on participation and what proportions are effective? Rigorous empirical analysis is also scarce. Addressing these gaps, this paper, based on primary data for community forestry institutions in India and Nepal, statistically tests if a group's gender composition affects women's effective participation, and if there are any critical mass effects. The results support the popularly emphasized proportions of one-quarter to one-third, but women's economic class also matters, as do some factors other than women's numbers.

Key words — participation, gender, proportional strength, critical mass, community forestry, South Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

> Men and women should be equally represented in the executive committee. Then it would make it easier for us to speak, to participate in decision making, and to get decisions implemented in favor of women. The population of male and female is almost equal in our village (Women executive committee members of a community forestry group, Baglung, Nepal, author's survey, 2000–01).

> More women in legislatures will make a difference because on the women's issues I have dealt with, I had a core of support from women. ... Not only will there be more support for bills from women, there will be more male awareness (Woman state legislator in the USA, cited in Thomas, 1994, p. 103).

There is a long standing assertion that women's effectiveness in public forums will depend on their proportional strength in the forum—the greater their presence the greater their ability to influence public policy or political behavior. But how much presence is needed for effectiveness? Many have argued that we need a "threshold representation" (Kymilcka, 1995, p. 147), or a "critical mass."[1] Crossing this threshold, it is argued, will make women's presence effective.[2] Kanter (1977a,1977b), one of the earliest to broach this issue (without actually using the term critical mass), argues, in the context of industrial corporate functioning, that 15% would constitute merely a token presence but moving upward would increase effectiveness, with 40–50% providing a balanced and effective presence. She does not, however, specify any single percentage. Indeed, many writers—most of them focusing on western democratic institutions—support the concept of critical mass without giving figures, and a few mention percentages ranging from 15 to 50. Thomas (1994), for instance, suggests that for women state legislatures in the USA to influence overall policies, even 25–30% is not enough and a figure closer to parity might be needed. Others, also studying US legislatures, suggest 25% (Carroll & Taylor, 1989) or 15% (Saint-Germain, 1989); while Lovenduski (1997, p. 718), from her research on the British House of Commons, argues for 20%, and Bratton and Ray (2002) and Dahlerup (1988)—the former empirically the latter discursively—emphasize 30% for women in Nordic countries. Rather few, however, statistically verify what proportions make a difference or test for a threshold effect.[3] Meanwhile, globally, the figure of one-third has gained popularity as *the* critical mass, and forms the basis for legislating or lobbying for gender quotas in diverse institutions—from parliament to village councils—in most countries.[4]

In these discussions not only is there a scarcity of rigorous statistical testing but also almost all the existing studies concentrate on what a greater female presence may empower women representatives to do (e.g., bring about a policy or legislative change), and virtually none outline the in-between process, namely, how numerical strength might empower women in the *process* of decision making itself. Active participation (such as attending meetings and speaking up at them) is a necessary intermediate step for women to influence decisions. Studies of western societies, with rare exceptions, implicitly assume that women once inducted into a decision-making body will attend meetings and speak up at them, in greater or lesser degree. In practice, even in the West the presence of more women can help, as the rare studies that have examined this indicate. Thomas (1994), for instance, found that the presence of more women made US female legislators less diffident in expressing themselves. She also noted (1994, p. 89) that having female majorities in a Californian city council and county board of supervisors in the early 1980s had two effects: one,

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"the presence of supportive colleagues (other women) encouraged female representatives to speak out and participate in the process rather than exhibit the reticence to which they might otherwise have resorted." Two, the women on the board felt more free to pursue issues which they may not have done otherwise, fearing that their choices would be considered deviant or get little support. This comfort of numbers is likely to be even more important in non-western cultures where rural women, typically unused to public participation, often need the presence of other women to help them overcome restrictive social norms and personal reticence.

This paper empirically examines whether women's proportional strength in the decision-making body of an institution of local governance has an impact on women's *effective* participation. It also seeks to identify a critical mass effect. Although to date, much of the debate around these issues has been in the context of political institutions at the highest level, it has relevance for a wider range of governance institutions and geographic contexts. In particular, the context of the present study—community forestry institutions in India and Nepal—is especially important today, since the conservation of forests (which serve as carbon sinks and can mitigate global warming) can depend on the actions of millions of such groups globally. There has, however, been little empirical testing of how the gender composition of such groups can impact on their functioning, after controlling for the effect of other factors. There is of course a substantial literature on gender and the environment, and a growing body of work on gender and environmental governance. In South Asia, these studies, some focusing on one or two villages or institutions, others on a larger cross-section, point to women's low participation in local institutions of forest governance. [5] Some authors also discuss, on the basis of field observations, the factors (especially cultural) underlying women's limited presence and voice. These studies, and the insights they provide, as well as my earlier review of these issues in Agarwal (1997, 2000, 2001) lay the ground for taking the analysis further, especially on two counts. First, we need to go beyond recognizing women's relative exclusion to asking what difference increasing their proportional strength could make; in other words, picking up on the pointers provided by the gender and politics literature. Second, it is time to subject long-standing assumptions and propositions on the difference women can make to more rigorous empirical verification. Most existing studies on local forest governance, when providing statistics (and many provide none), rarely go beyond cross-tabulations. The few studies that, to my knowledge, have sought to statistically test the effect of gender (variously defined) on natural resource management by controlling for other factors, have focused on the impact on project performance, and not on the process of women's participation itself, which is the concern of this paper. [6] Methodologically, the paper tests the gender effects through regression analysis, while also drawing on qualitative insights from field conversations.

2. CONTEXT, DATA, AND MEASUREMENT

The empirical basis for my analysis is primary data collected during 2000–01 on gendered participation in community forestry institutions (CFIs) in India and Nepal—the two South Asian countries with significant community forestry programs. CFIs are constituted of groups managing forest land owned by the government but given over to local communities/user groups to protect and govern. In India, most of these have emerged under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) Programme launched in 1990, and in Nepal through a somewhat similar initiative in 1993. [7] In both regions, the CFIs represent a significant shift away from the earlier top-down approach to forest governance to a decentralized approach. In India, CFIs have rights to extract non-timber products and to a proportion of any mature timber that the forest department allows to be harvested. In Nepal, although in principle the CFIs can extract all products and keep the full amount, in practice timber cutting is again restricted according to how the forest department defines "sustainable harvest levels" (Ojha & Timsina, 2008, p. 216). By the early 2000s (around the time of my survey) India had around 84,000 JFM groups involving 8.4 million households and 22.5% of its forest land, and Nepal had around 10,000 groups involving about 1 million households and 11.4% of its forest land. [8]

In both India and Nepal, the CFIs broadly have a two-tier organizational structure, consisting of a general body (GB) with members drawn from the whole village and an executive committee (EC) of 9–15 members. The EC is the core decision-making body which, in interaction with the GB (and in varying degree with the forest department), defines the rules for forest use and benefit sharing, the penalties for rule violation, methods of protection, and so on.

Communities, when they begin protecting a forest, restrict the entry of people and animals and use a mix of protection methods, such as employing a guard (usually paid by the community), forming patrol groups, or both, while also keeping an informal lookout for intruders. The forest use rules that CFIs formulate can range from an almost total ban on extraction of forest products to varying degrees of permitted extraction of firewood, fodder, and other products. The rules made can depend on the EC's social and economic composition, forest size and condition, the community's monitoring ability, the nature of the product, and related factors (Agarwal, 2009). Since rural women are the main collectors of non-timber products, in particular firewood, which is rarely purchased, [9] a strict ban on collection can have negative consequences, especially for the time and energy they must spend in collecting fuel from other sources, and the negative health effects of switching to inferior, smokier fuels such as cropwaste. Women of poor households are the worst affected and have the most stake in the extraction rules, especially for firewood. Since the EC plays a critical role in the running of the CFI and especially in framing extraction rules, the members who constitute the EC have a crucial bearing on how the institution functions, and who gains or loses from it. Notably too, the decisions that EC members make affect both themselves and the larger community, which gives their decisions a much more personalized character than is the case in upper echelons of decision making. It is therefore particularly important to focus on women's proportional strength in the EC and its impact on their effective participation in decision making.

My data relates to 135 CFIs, of which 65 are located in three districts of Gujarat in western India and 70 are located primarily in three districts of Nepal in the middle hills. [10] The Gujarat districts are Narmada/Bharuch, [11] Panchmahals, and Sabarkantha. Each district has an important non-governmental organization (NGO) working on community forest management, and all three NGOs have broadly similar aims in terms of participatory development, environmental protection, and social inclusion. Indeed, an important reason for choosing Gujarat was that these three NGOs had information on the gender composition of CFIs. This information was essential for sample selection. No state in India collects comprehensive information of this kind. The government of Nepal, however, does collect such data and this served as the basis of district identification in Nepal (for details, see Agarwal, in press-b).