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When and how do women participate in politics in Bihar?

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- Politics in Indian villages continues to be dominated by men. Yet, women have recently begun to vote at a higher rate than men, even in the most deprived regions.
- Women's electoral turnout varies dramatically between neighbouring districts, with the south-west maintaining the long-run historical pattern of women's under-participation.
- Comparison with other datasets' spatial patterns suggests that factors such as gendered differences in literacy or labour force participation, the presence of scheduled tribes or castes, and women's participation in self-help groups cannot fully explain the gender gap in voting.
- Instead, preliminary findings suggest that differences in the organisation of social and political relationships within villages, governed by contrasting social norms and expectations, are central to explaining gendered turnout decisions.
- This study seeks to understand what drives women to vote in some villages but not others, and whether similar patterns hold for other forms of political participation. To measure social relationships and norms, it collects census data on the residents of 12 villages in Bihar.
- The analysis focuses, in particular, on the nature of women's increased political participation, exploring whether it reflects co-optation into existing traditional clientelist political relationships or the emergence of an alternative form of politics practised by women.

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Overview of the research

For decades, women in India remained absent from public life and remained outside political institutions (Chhibber, 2002). More recently, rapid economic growth, political reservations, and social empowerment have produced a “silent revolution” in the role of women in public life in Bihar and provided a pathway for women to enter political life. Over seven million women have been mobilised in self-help groups (SHGs), and thousands of women are now *mukhiyas* (village heads) leading *Gram Panchayats* (village councils). The 2019 parliamentary elections in India marked a sea change for women: the gender turnout gap that stood at 13% in 2004 had disappeared, and women turned out to vote at a higher rate than men in at least nine Indian states.

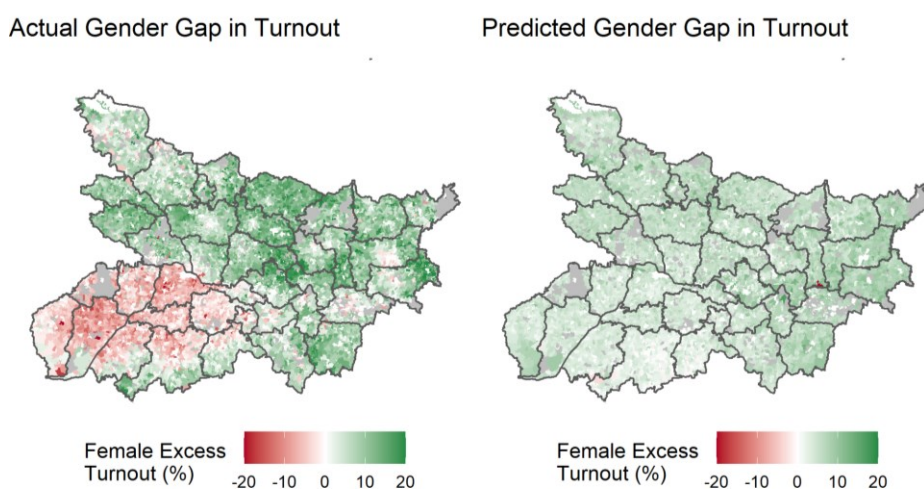
Yet, we know almost nothing about how this recent entry of women into public and political life has changed the way that local politics and governance take place. As historic political outsiders, this mass influx of women into politics is a one-off opportunity to stimulate new political relationships and better governance (Lizzeri, 2004). If women can form new networks based on clear policy demands rather than personal and patronage connections, accountability gaps in local schools and clinics, leakages in social programs, and capture by local (predominantly male) elites could be rapidly reversed. Yet, there is a strong risk that women may also be co-opted into the same old networks or subject to a strong backlash by men, limiting their transformative potential.

To understand these patterns, we partnered with the Chief Electoral Officer for Bihar State to analyse data on gendered turnout by polling stations in the 2019 General Election. The data revealed the extent to which women’s turnout has already overtaken that of men, with women almost 4 percentage points more likely to turnout at the average polling station. Panel A of Figure 1 maps the gender turnout gap at the *Gram Panchayat* level across Bihar, with a positive number indicating that a greater percentage of women turned out to vote than men and a negative number indicating the reverse. In 11 districts, the gender gap favours women by more than 8 percentage points. However, these margins are offset by six districts, all in the south-west of the state, where men continue to outvote women by more than 4 percentage points.

These findings suggest the importance of two key research questions. First, what accounts for this wide variation in the gender turnout gap and the geographic concentration of women’s continued underrepresentation? Second, where women have become more politically active, on what terms do they participate – on the same terms as men, through existing elites, political parties, caste identities, and relationships of clientelist exchange; or on new terms set

by women themselves, reflecting women's policy preferences, collective action among women, and a rejection of traditional politics?

FIGURE 1: Actual versus predicted gender gap in turnout in Bihar



As a first attempt at answering these questions, we constructed a regression model of the determinants of the gender gap in turnout at the *Gram Panchayat* level that incorporated key existing theories. A common explanation for women's increasing political agency is increased economic agency. Yet, between 2004 and 2019, female labour force participation in India declined from 32% to 21%. This analysis confirmed that female literacy, female labour force participation rates, women's participation in self-help groups, village size, the proportion of the population who are members of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, and the sex ratio all go some way to explaining in which *Gram Panchayats* women outvote men (though both Scheduled Tribe and female labour force participation rate ran counter to theoretical expectations).

All of these factors, however, explain only 9% of the variation in gendered turnout and crucially do not correlate with the stark contrast between the southwest of Bihar and the rest of the state. Panel B (right side) of Figure 1 illustrates what the gender gap in turnout would look like if the existing explanations were the only factors involved, based on the predictions from our regression model. While the east of the state is expected to have marginally greater female turnout due to the more favourable social and economic status that women in this part of the state experience, there is no sign of the stark divide along the River Ganges or in the southwest. As a result, the dominant source of variation in the gender gap in turnout remains almost entirely unexplained by existing arguments.

To more definitively investigate the geographic variation, our research focused on Gaya District, which exhibits the second highest variation in female excess turnout between *Gram Panchayats* and a clear geographic line around which

female participation varies, allowing us to focus on variation from broader social and cultural norms. Our study collects data from 8,000 respondents across 12 villages, stratified by the gender gap in turnout and the degree of women's economic mobilisation in self-help groups. Our data collection censuses all adult residents in these villages and asks respondents about their social and political networks, allowing us to measure whether women's connections outside the household affect their political participation. By measuring distinct types of relationships, we also capture the forms of political participation that women engage in – in particular, whether they are involved in clientelist exchange or collective action with other women, and the nature of their political demands.

Our findings to date suggest that policies to promote women's electoral participation should be geographically targeted to south-west Bihar and focused on altering social norms and expectations around women's independent political participation. To translate recent increases in women's voting into a broader transformation in governance, policymakers must understand how women are being mobilised into political action.

Policy motivation for research

Two key policy actors provided motivation to investigate the dynamics of gendered participation. First, the Jeevika programme seeks to support women's empowerment in Bihar through the establishment of self-help groups, but is concerned with the sustainability of its impact if women continue to play subordinate roles in local political decision-making and are unable to access the support and public goods their nascent businesses require. The Chief Executive Officer of Jeevika expressed the organisation's interest in understanding why some self-help groups are able to become politically active, for example, by taking on the role of running the local Public Distribution System, while others remain excluded from influencing village decisions.

Our study, therefore, documents the political mobilisation process to compare the political engagement of women who are more or less socially connected outside their household, in village contexts where women have or have not already been organised socially and economically. The aim is to discover what types of training, connections and resources women might need to be able to participate autonomously.

Second, the Chief Electoral Officer of Bihar state has considered a range of efforts to encourage women's electoral registration and participation, including targeted communications campaigns and the establishment of women-only polling stations. However, the organisation had a limited understanding of the scale of the problem or where to target its resources. By mapping detailed

polling station data on the gender gap in turnout and investigating the roots of women's participation, our study aims to help inform new strategies to sustain and extend the growth in women's participation, and also support new efforts to ensure men's participation.

Policy recommendations

Our preliminary findings suggest:

- Women's increased electoral participation is not sufficient to change local governance practices on its own and is likely to require additional policy efforts to promote their equal participation in other forums, such as *Gram Sabha* (village assembly) meetings and political parties.
- Policies to promote women's electoral participation should be geographically targeted to south-west Bihar and focused on altering social norms and expectations around women's participation.
- New policy tools are required to stimulate men's electoral participation in the rest of the state in order to maintain the legitimacy of the democratic process.
- To translate recent increases in women's voting into a broader transformation in governance, policymakers must understand how women are being mobilised and encourage women to organise themselves for political action, rather than encouraging the expansion of existing political actors and practices.

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