



Gender equality and prospects for good governance

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- Women's greater representation in politics has been shown to be correlated with more accountable governance, but many theories to explain this relationship rely upon gender essentialism.
- We find that gendered differences in engagement with corruption and clientelism are better explained by differences in men's and women's access to politics than by differences in their nature or socialisation.
- We examine how the structure of political connections within villages perpetuates both the gender gap in political participation and clientelist practices.
- We find that women have significantly fewer political connections than men and that men do not consider women important political actors. Men are both more central and more influential in village politics, while women exist largely on the periphery of village politics. Exclusion from political connections is associated with women's lower political participation.
- As a result of women's limited political connections, women also have significantly less access to networks that support the clientelistic exchange of votes for preferential access to goods and services.
- However, once women's political participation levels are accounted for, the gender gap in clientelism reverses. Women who participate in politics at an equal level to men are more likely to receive vote-buying offers.
- Consistent with the idea that access is a binding constraint, there is a latent demand among women overlooked by political brokers, who report a substantially greater willingness than men to engage in such

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clientelist practices. And among men and women with the same access to clientelist networks, practices are very similar.

- Ultimately, our findings suggest that limited opportunities may drive observed differences in the practice of clientelism across genders, so that gender equality alone is unlikely to reduce clientelist exchange.

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Overview of the research

For decades, women in India remained absent from public life and outsiders from political institutions.¹ More recently, rapid economic growth, political reservations, and social empowerment have produced a “silent revolution” in the role of women in public life in India, and provided a pathway for women to enter political spaces. More than 100 million women have been mobilized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs or small microcredit collectives), and nearly three million women are now elected representatives of local governments. In much of the country, women now vote at a higher rate than men.

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. 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. As Wantchekon argues, rural women might be systematically excluded from the most common forms of clientelist redistribution, and those groups might therefore be more responsive to a platform of public goods.² Yet, there is a strong risk that women may also be co-opted into the same old clientelist networks or subject to a strong backlash by men, limiting their transformative potential. This study evaluates the terms of women’s growing political participation - whether, and how, it has reshaped the structure of local political networks, the relationships between politicians and these networks, and the nature of local governance practices. We find striking evidence that actively engaged women are *more likely* than similar men to engage in clientelism, and women excluded from political spaces are *more likely* than similar men to desire clientelism. These findings have important implications for the future of governance in rural India as women gain political power.

¹ Chhibber, Pradeep. “Why are some women politically active? The household, public space, and political participation in India.” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 43.3-5 (2002): 409-429.; Prillaman, Soledad Artiz. *The Patriarchal Political Order: the making and unraveling of the participation gap in India*. Cambridge University Press. 2024.

² Wantchekon, Leonard. “Clientelism and voting behavior: Evidence from a field experiment in Benin.” *World politics* 55.3 (2003): 399-422.

Data collection

We study a context in which deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and the historical exclusion of women from politics are rapidly being confronted by a recent wave of increased female participation in elections: the Indian state of Bihar. Women in Bihar were 12% points *less* likely to vote than men in 2004, but 5% points *more* likely to vote in 2019.

We conducted a survey of all 7,430 residents of 16 villages in Bihar. Since our focus was on understanding whether and how women become incorporated into village politics, we collected community census data from a sample of 16 rural villages selected to maximize variation in gendered turnout (as measured by the gap between female and male turnout) and women's socioeconomic empowerment (as measured by the proportion of women in Self-Help Groups). We captured data on village networks using a series of name generator questions, which, for each type of network, asked respondents to name up to five people from their village whom they relate to in the specified way. Given our census of all adults, we are able to directly map the names provided with data on those individuals to construct information on village networks and relationships.

Findings

TABLE 1: Research questions and findings

Research Question	Findings
How does gender shape political connections and village political networks?	Women have significantly fewer political connections than men and greater gender heterogeneity in their networks. Despite having fewer connections on average, over half of women's political discussion networks are still comprised of men. Women are significantly less likely to be connected to central and influential members of their community. As a result, village political networks are centered around men but not divided by gender.
Does the size and composition of a person's political network shape their political participation?	There is a positive and significant correlation between the number of political connections a person has and their political participation. For women, this positive relationship is driven primarily by the number of political connections they have outside of their household.

Are women less likely to engage in clientelism than men?

Women report receiving significantly fewer vote-buying offers than men, and significantly fewer connections to electoral brokers. These gendered differences in clientelist engagement are not driven by underlying differences in economic vulnerability, political interest, or political knowledge. However, men and women show no distinguishable difference in whether they consider vote-buying acceptable, and women actually report a significantly greater willingness to engage in vote-buying and clientelism than men, including among those who are not offered clientelist exchanges by brokers. This latent demand for clientelism among women suggests that, when presented with the opportunity, women are no less likely to engage in systems of patronage.

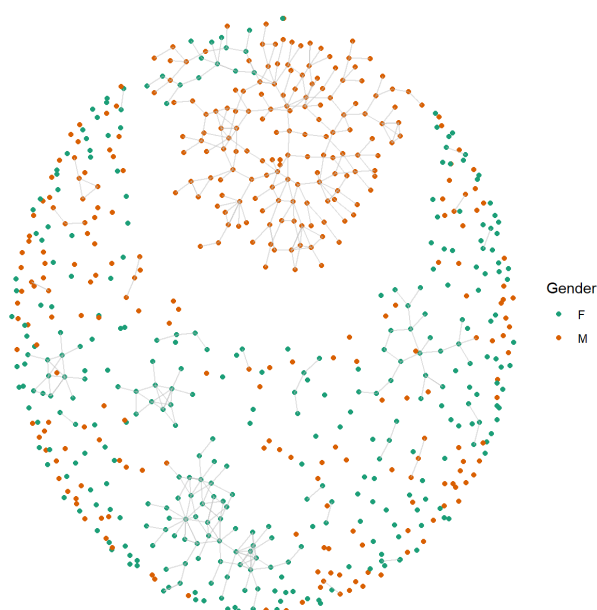
Will women's increased participation in politics improve governance?

The evidence suggests that women's less frequent participation in poor governance practices such as clientelism is driven primarily by a lack of opportunity, rather than a difference in their nature or preferences. Among men and women with equal access to clientelist networks, the gender gap in vote-buying largely disappears – women who can name as many political brokers as men are just as likely to receive a vote-buying offer, and women with equal levels of political participation to men are more likely to receive a vote-buying offer.

How does gender shape political connections and village political networks? Using our data from nearly all residents in one of our sample villages, we map all of the reported connections between residents in Figure 1, where each circle represents a village resident and every line represents a connection. The social lives of villagers are almost perfectly defined by gender; women socialize with women and men socialize with men (see the lack of lines connecting male and female villagers in panel a of Figure 1). However, the political lives of male and female villagers, depicted in panel b of Figure 1, are closely intertwined, with women reporting 44% of their connections are to men (most of which – 84% - are men in their household). Strikingly, only 10% of men's reported political connections are with women, demonstrating how women do not register as political entities for the vast majority of men, despite women perceiving a political connection. Gender inequality in political connections bears out more broadly. Women have fewer political connections than men: Across the sixteen villages in which we collected data, men reported an average of 2.0 people with whom they discuss politics outside their household, and women reported an average of 1.4. And, women have fewer connections with the politically powerful than men. The number of connections to the most politically influential people in the village averaged 1.4 for men but only 0.56 for women.

Figure 1: Maps of village social and political networks reveal the distinct ways connections are gendered.

a. Social Discussion



b. Political Discussion

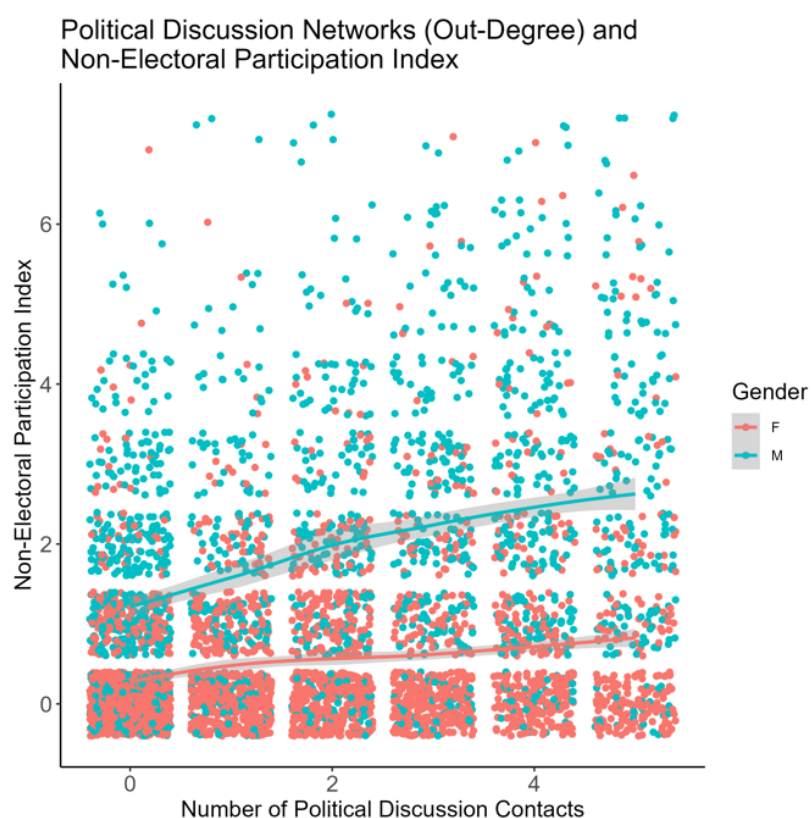


Do women's limited political connections correspond with their limited political participation? Yes. We find a positive and significant correlation between the number of political connections a person has and their likelihood of participating in politics outside of elections. Figure 2 depicts the bivariate correlation between the size of a person's political network (in total in panel a and outside of their

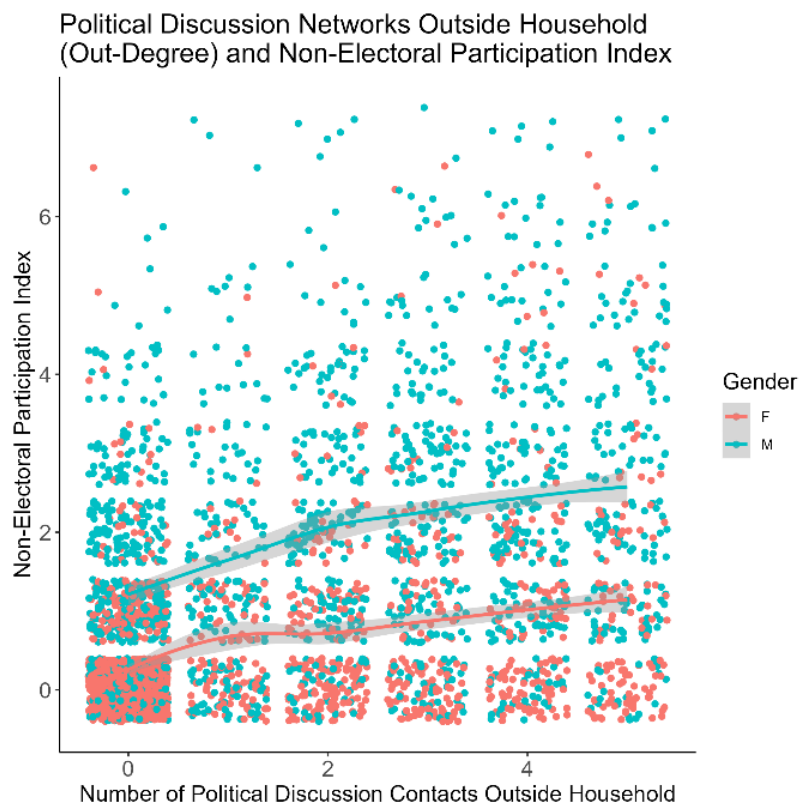
household in panel b) and the number of political activities (excluding voting) they had participated in over the past one year. When looking at men, there is a clear positive relationship between the size of a person's political network and their engagement in non-electoral politics, irrespective of whether you look at their connections in total or just outside of their household. For women, however, this positive relationship is much stronger when considering their connections outside of their household. This suggests that gender inequalities in both the size of political networks and in the nature of political connections underlie lingering inequalities in political participation.

Figure 2 (points jittered for clarity): The correlation between political network size and political participation shows that only networks outside of the household correlate with greater participation for women.

a. Total political network



b. Extra-household political network



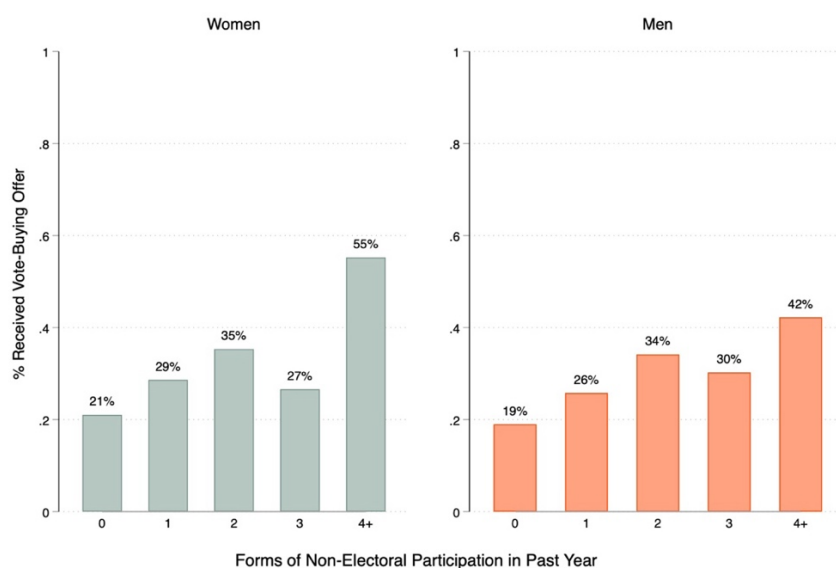
What does this tell us about gender and the nature of village governance? Are women less likely to engage in clientelism than men? Women citizens' limited political connections suggest that limited opportunities, as opposed to their nature, may drive observed differences in the practice of clientelism across genders. In fact, our survey reveals that women receive fewer vote-buying offers than men and have fewer connections to electoral brokers who facilitate the exchange of votes for preferable treatment in access to government services. In our survey, 25% of men reported connections with electoral brokers, and more than 50% of men were able to name someone whom they could approach for help in getting a benefit for their household. These same connections were true for only 13% and 32% of women, respectively. Come election time, 29% of men reported being offered food, money, or anything else in exchange for their vote as compared to 24% of women.

However, this lack of participation in vote-buying may not reflect women's commitment to a more honest politics, and simply their exclusion from the connections that make vote-buying possible. In fact, women report a *greater willingness* than men to exchange their votes for bribes or other preferable treatment. Strikingly, women who did not receive a clientelist offer were nearly twice as likely as similar men to say that they would be willing to trade their votes for direct benefits. And they are just as likely as men to say that practices of patronage and vote-buying are acceptable. This demand is not explained by

women's greater economic vulnerability, nor is it explained by women's levels of political knowledge or political preferences. Given such high latent demand for clientelism among women, it is hard to conclude that the gender gap in access to clientelism is because of gendered patterns of socialization.

We additionally find that political connectedness and participation strongly correlate with access to clientelism: women who participate in politics more often (and therefore have greater exposure to political networks) are significantly more likely to be targets of clientelist offers. When political participation levels are equalized for men and women, women are actually *more* likely to receive vote-buying offers than men. In other words, **once the gender gap in political participation is accounted for, the gender gap in clientelism reverses**. Figure 3 depicts this relationship and shows that the most politically active women are more likely to have received a vote-buying offer than men (though women are substantially less likely to be politically active than men).

Figure 3: The likelihood that an individual receives a vote-buying offer increases with their self-reported level of political participation in the past one year, especially for women.



Policy Recommendations

Our findings reveal how gender gaps in political participation are supported by the gendered structure of political connections. However, our evidence also challenges conventional wisdom that women are more likely than men to demand good governance because of differences in nature and socialization, and instead suggests that such correlations may be a function of gendered political opportunities and connections. Women demonstrate a willingness to

engage in the clientelistic exchange of political favor for votes, but they lack access to the networks that would enable this. The result is politics that is deeply gendered, but because of male dominance in influential positions and the perceived benefits of these positions, women want access to these sources of power. The rising tide of gender equality, as a result, is likely to reshape politics in equalizing ways, but may fall short on the promise of improved governance. These findings yield a set of policy recommendations aiming to support both greater inclusion and more accountable governance practices:

- Create opportunities for women to form networks outside of their households.

Our findings suggest that women are more likely to participate in politics when they have larger networks outside of the household. This is supported by evidence we have generated in other research showing that women's groups increase women's political participation.³

Fostering opportunities for women to build their networks outside of their households, such as through the creation of women's groups, may have positive consequences for their political participation.

- Reduce the barriers to access to government services.

Men and women both reported the need to work with central figures in the village to help them solve problems and gain access to government services. This suggests that the difficulty in navigating both bureaucratic and political structures may lead to the rise of brokers and an informal politics where access to services is contingent on electoral support. Addressing access barriers may therefore help to reduce clientelistic practices.

- For good governance, structures of power and weak accountability must be directly addressed.

While women have less access to clientelism and vote-buying than men, they appear to want them, likely recognizing the efficacy and dominance of these forms of politics in the prevailing political environment. This suggests that it is unlikely that women's inclusion in politics alone will yield better governance. Unless the power structures and incentives that perpetuate these patterns of governance are directly tackled, citizens (including those historically excluded from politics) are likely to pursue access to political rents by replicating current governance practices.

³ Prillaman, Soledad Artiz. "Strength in numbers: how women's groups close India's political gender gap." *American Journal of Political Science* (2021).