

Women Political Leaders, Corruption and Learning: Evidence from a Large Public Program in India

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I. POLICY MOTIVATION FOR RESEARCH

We study how affirmative action through randomized political reservation of village council (gram panchayat or GP) headships for women impact on corruption and on the quality of implementation of projects under MG-NREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in the state of Andhra Pradesh (AP), India.

Policy Impact

Using primary survey data, we find more program inefficiencies and leakages in village councils reserved for women heads: political and administrative inexperience make such councils more vulnerable to bureaucratic capture. When using a panel of audit reports, governance improves as women leaders

learn and accumulate experience. Our results show that female political leadership generates governance gains but only with a time lag and after initial, gendered disadvantages recede. While women heads perform poorly in the initial year of their tenure, their performance improves in subsequent years and surpasses that of male heads over the entire period of tenure.

Political reservations need initial back up in the form of preparatory training: women in power have less education and often have no prior political experience and require assistance in the day-to-day execution of duties,

II. AUDIENCE

Scholars and policy makers working on (i) affirmative action as a tool for women's

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empowerment (ii) implementation of MGNREGA in Andhra Pradesh and other states of India.

III. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our research draws on primary data from surveys of 100 block level bureaucrats, 300 village council heads (sarpanchs) and 1500 MGNREGA beneficiary households in eight districts of Andhra Pradesh. We have also translated and extracted information from a panel of official social audit reports.

Our analysis of the primary data shows the following:

- **In GPs with female reservation, households are more likely to have been asked to pay to receive the MGNREGA job card which is meant to be free. This effect is large.** We also find that job card provision is marginally, but significantly, higher in female reserved GPs and job-cards are near-ubiquitous: irrespective of GP reservation status. Paradoxically, only about 20 per cent of these job cards have entries.
- **In female reserved GPs, beneficiary households are more likely to have been asked to verify muster roll entries. Conditional on such verification, households are more likely to discover discrepancies between actual and official wage payment records.**
- **Wage payments also take longer to reach** and although not statistically significant, payments received are more often below what they should have been for households in female reserved GPs. Finally, and also not significant, households in reserved GPs are also more likely to be paid in cash rather than through the appropriate channels of postal accounts, bank accounts or smart-cards.
- **Women GP heads in reserved seats are less educated and have less prior political experience, on average.** Female reserved village council heads (about 73%), far more often than unreserved village council heads (around 13%) are assisted by a relative in the execution of daily duties.

For the social audit panel data, we find the following:

- **Although the number of irregularities in MNREGA implementation – in both labour and materials related component of the programme – were significantly higher in female reserved village councils at the onset of the programme, these decline with the duration of the tenure of the head (sarpanch).**
- **Over time these governance improvements in women reserved councils more than compensate for the initial, gendered disadvantage.**

- We find evidence of a strengthening of women's political voice through greater reporting of NREGA malfeasance by women, individually or in groups, in female reserved GPs.
- Contrary to the pessimism that often surrounds political commentary in the sub-continent, more experience does not necessarily make politicians more conniving- for women political leaders experience translates into vital governance gains.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

Training programs, for women political leaders, may be critical for strengthening affirmative action policies and for grass-roots institutions. Existing training programs can be strengthened and modules for financial literacy and for specific (and ambitious) public programs (like MGNREGA) incorporated within them.

V. DISSEMINATION

Ministry of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (GOI), Planning Commission (GOI), UN-Women, World Bank.

VI. FURTHER READINGS

Afridi, F., V. Iversen and M. R. Sharan (2013): Women Political Leaders, corruption and learning: Evidence from a Large Public Program in India, IGC Working Paper