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ARE WE LISTENING?

Results from a World Bank study on the effects of SHGs on **DELIBERATIVE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**

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This note is based on the paper *Unheard Voices: The Challenge of Inducing Women's Civic Speech*, authored by R. Parthasarthy, V. Rao and N. Palaniswamy,¹

CONTEXT

It has been widely noted that women's participation in political and economic processes leads to significant improvements in quality of life, and in the creation of a more equitable society. However, despite formal guarantees of political equality and mechanisms to improve participation, women across the globe continue to be systematically under-represented in politics at every level.

In a country like India, this presents an especially acute challenge given entrenched gender inequalities and persisting low representation of women in high tiers of elected office. Despite 30% reservation in Gram Sabhas, they constitute 9.7% of parliamentary candidates and 14% of elected Members of Parliament. At the local level, women are even less likely to attend political gatherings, participate in community resource management, and run for local office. Furthermore, women often face social costs for speaking in public and are usually less educated or informed.

Various public sector programs have tried to increase women's participation in political processes, broadly using two methods – first

HIGHLIGHTS

What is the impact of women Self Help Group (SHG) programs on 'bottom up' political participation at the grass roots level? Results from the impact evaluation of one such long running program - Pudhu Vaazhvu Project (PVP) in Tamil Nadu indicate:

- Significant improvement in women's participation in the gram sabha by doubling attendance.
- Significant increase in speech and floor time.
- Increased social capital and women's sense of political efficacy and identity.
- No evidence that improved participation leads to improved agenda setting power of women, nor of eliciting a response from government officials.
- Discussions on issues of importance to SHGs may crowd out issues that the gram sabha is more inclined to focus on such as infrastructure, budget allocation and beneficiary selection for public programs.

1. The original paper is available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/216591498569537722/pdf/WPS8120.pdf>



BOX 1: LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

The 73rd Amendment of the Indian constitution set up a three-tier system of local government, of which the village council, or the *gram panchayat*, is the lowest. In order to provide an institutional check on elite dominance (i) 33% of seats in the village council are reserved for women, and a number proportional to their population for disadvantaged castes and (ii) frequent village assemblies or *gram sabhas* provide citizens the opportunity to deliberate and advise the village council.

by guaranteeing the representation of women at the lowest level of local government, and second, more recently from a 'bottom up' perspective by building women's organizations through a system of Self Help Groups (SHGs), aimed largely at providing credit and livelihoods to rural women.

While these initiatives have had strong positive outcomes, the mere *presence* of women in the *gram sabha* does not seem to have a discernible effect on the women's *participation* in the council or the *gram sabha* and evidence of impacts on women's participation in decision making at the local level is required to inform policies and programs.

BOX 2: CULTURAL CONTEXT ON WOMEN IN THE STATE OF TAMIL NADU

Women's status in the state of Tamil Nadu is marginally better than other parts of rural India. However, studies suggest that a relatively higher degree of female autonomy may be confined only to extended family interaction, rather than interactions outside the family. Census data also confirms that recent improvements in education and labor market opportunities have benefited men much more than women. Labor force participation rates for rural Tamil Nadu are 59.3% for men and 31.8% for women.

INTERVENTION

Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been a major coping strategy for the rural poor in Tamil Nadu since the early 1990s and had seen noteworthy success under various central, state and development partner initiatives. However, while most initiatives were successful in mobilizing and forming SHGs of the poor and empowering village institutions, challenges of exclusion of the truly poor and disadvantaged remained, along with the ability of these groups to sustainably reduce debt and support livelihood diversification.

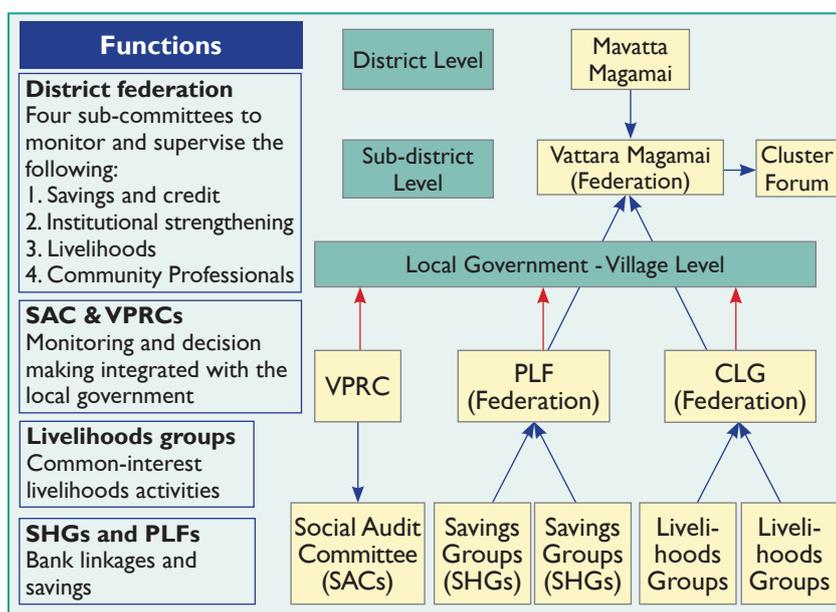
To address this exclusion and existing economic inequality, the GoTN envisaged the development of village level organizations that represented the poor and worked synergistically on shared development goals within the framework of the *gram sabha*. In this context, the Tamil Nadu Empowerment and Poverty Reduction Project (TNEPRP) Pudhu Vaazhvu Project (PVP) was rolled out in 16 selected districts.

To implement the various interventions, the village organization – the Village Poverty Reduction Committee (VPRC) – was designed as the core institution and comprised federated SHGs whose

representatives were democratically elected. While the VPRC's core mandate remained credit and livelihoods support for SHG women, PVP would facilitate linkages with local governments (VPs) to improve access to welfare benefits and improve local accountability. A three-tiered project structure - district, block and cluster (of villages) – was instituted to support the implementation of the project. Lastly, a Social Audit Committee comprising 3-5 people nominated by the village was setup to monitor all project activities.

Within each district, blocks were chosen on the basis of a poverty and “backwardness” score that included the number of households below the poverty line and the population of socially disadvantaged groups, Scheduled Castes and Tribes. All villages within selected blocks were eligible for the PVP program, and within each village, a set of households was identified through the participatory identification process.

Figure 1: PVP's institutional model and integration with local governments



EVALUATION DESIGN

The study aimed at measuring whether and how PVP's focus on public action and inclusion affects the *quality* and *character* of participation in *gram sabhas* and accords citizens an opportunity to influence local governance. It represents one of the first attempts at a quantitative analysis of SHGs that measures objective outcomes rather than self-reports.

The research team reconstructed the PVP selection process (regression discontinuity design) by creating a matched sample of comparable treatment and control villages. Full audio recordings of the *gram sabha*, and a standardized questionnaire collected information on the attendance of citizens and local officials, on the nature of issues raised by citizens, and demographic data on who raised these issues. Using the Structural Topic Model (STM), a set of 25 topics discussed within the *gram sabhas* were identified and used to understand how these topics vary with the identifiable characteristics of speakers and villages.

KEY FINDINGS

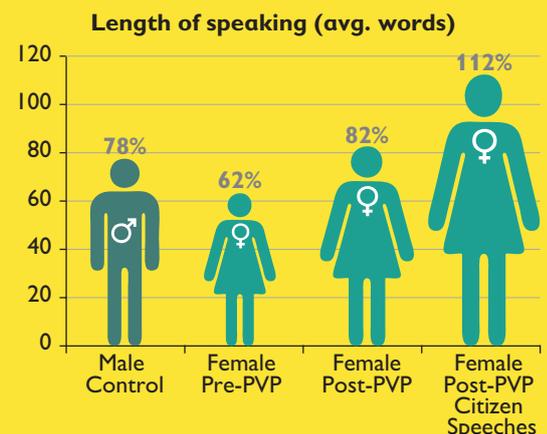
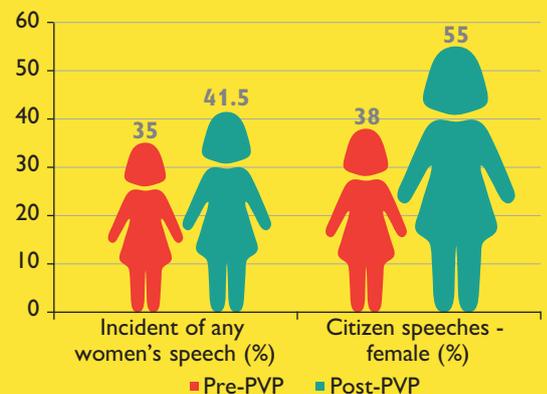
PVP was found to be immensely successful, with significant increases in women's attendance, frequency and length of speech (Box 3), when

participation factors alone were examined. However, when the deliberative influence of women in the PVP *gram sabhas* was considered, the researchers found more complex results.

The team found no improvements in the agenda setting power of women. Given that *gram sabhas* are a forum for citizens to demand accountability, failure to respond to women suggests that they remain unheard. Despite not having substantive influence, women feel more empowered in the PVP villages, with 25% more likely to state that they would take some form of action to address issues of family and village concern, than their counterparts in non-PVP villages.

The study indicated a decline in the discussion of customarily identifiable women's issues related to domestic matters such as water collection and education in the *gram sabha*, in favour of discussions on matters of project administration and activities, loan audits and job training. This indicates that women in the PVP program are fundamentally shifting the content of the conversation that they engage in.

BOX 3: EQUALITY OF PARTICIPATION



POLICY LESSONS

The results point towards the success of “bottom up” interventions in significantly improving women’s *participation* in politics - women were speaking up, more confidently and about matters more related to administration in PVP villages. However, whether elected officials in the village council were hearing their voices is another matter. The negligible improvement in state responsiveness to, and agenda setting by women in the *gram sabhas* points to a deeper difficulty in improving deliberative equality.

Over time, there is a need to cautiously monitor programs that alter the organic processes of the *gram sabha* to assess whether empowering one group could inadvertently lead to unintended consequences for others. While the dominance of men in the *gram sabha* may be diminished, it may become dominated by some vocal PVP participants.

Lastly, the methodology used in the PVP study is significant as it provides a more rigorous foundation for conclusions drawn from studies based on self-reports, where concerns about responses being biased by project goals remain.

CONCLUSION

Achieving gender parity in the political sphere, particularly in local government, is a complex process. The substantive gains made under the aegis of the PVP program suggest that similar policy interventions can have a positive impact on challenging gender norms and empowering women. However, challenges remain. Although women are speaking significantly more in the civic sphere it appears that they are still not being heard.

While the PVP may help amplify the voices of women in rural governance, it should be recognized that this change could also shift discourse away from the topics raised by other citizens and towards PVP-specific activities. Given the limited amount of time to conduct *gram sabhas*, this may crowd out other issues of relevance to the wider community. Honing our ability to listen will require a long-term commitment and continuous fine-tuning.

ABOUT THE IMPACT NOTE SERIES

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