ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & INSTITUTIONS

UKaid from the British people

EDI COVID-19 ESSAY SERIES

September 2020

The power of women's collective action

Soledad Artiz Prillaman



About the covid-19 essay series

In response to the covid-19 global pandemic, the EDI programme commissioned a series of essays written by EDI researchers. Essays highlight the relevance of EDI research to the covid-19 crisis, in many cases referring to ongoing EDI research. They illustrate how an understanding of the relationship between institutions and economic development might help to gauge the impact of the crisis and to formulate a response. For more information, please visit: www.edi.opml.co.uk

EDI publications represent the views of the authors, and are not necessarily held or endorsed by the programme or its partner organizations.

© Economic Development & Institutions

The Power of Women's Collective Action
Soledad Artiz Prillaman

For decades, women in India have been largely absent from public life and substantially under-represented in political institutions. As a country founded on the ideals of localized democracy, this has meant that the voices of roughly half of the population have been absent from political dialogue. Research has demonstrated that these absent voices are likely to carry distinct demands, and the inclusion of women in politics leads to different policy outcomes.[1]

The last several decades have given rise to a "silent revolution" in the role of women in public life. For one, the establishment of political reservations in local elected office have ensured the physical representation of women in politics. Since 1992, when the Constitution of India was amended to reserve a minimum of 33% of local elected seats for women, women have become a fixture in political institutions. While there continues to be debate about whether these reservations have generated substantive representation for women[2], a growing academic consensus documents the power of mere descriptive representation, suggesting that areas reserved for women deliver services more in line with women's preferences[3], increase women's subsequent election to office[4], increase perceptions of women as competent leaders[5], and increase aspirations among young girls[6].

Yet, an important part of the "silent revolution" has not come from Constitutional or legal mandate, but instead from grassroots mobilizing of female citizens. Despite the gains to women's electoral representation, female citizens continue to be under-represented in forums for political decision-making and in broader political participation. Figure 1 depicts this lingering gender gap. In a 2016 survey of roughly 1,100 women and 500 men in rural Madhya Pradesh, women reported attending the quarterly village assembly meeting on average 50 percentage points less than men and reported contacting their local leader on average 30 percentage points less than men. These inequalities hold when evaluating representative data from across India, where average attendance rates at village assembly meetings range from 25-33% for men and 6-11% for women across five caste sub-categories, highlighting that participatory differences across caste are much less distinct than differences across gender.

In the face of such persistent inequalities, female citizens in much of the country have responded by collectively acting to demand access to politics. While women's political participation remains low on average across India, grassroots women's movements have emerged and effectuated important political change. A well-known example is the Gulabi Gang, an informal group of women in North India, known for their pink Saris, who have fought to reduce domestic violence and empower

---

[1] Chattopadhyay, Raghabendra, and Esther Duflo. "Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India." *Econometrica* 72.5 (2004): 1409-1443.
[2] Ban, Radu, and Vijayendra Rao. "Tokenism or agency? The impact of women's reservations on village democracies in south India." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 56.3 (2008): 501-530.
[3] Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004.
[4] Bhavnani, Rikhil R. "Do electoral quotas work after they are withdrawn? Evidence from a natural experiment in India." *American Political Science Review* (2009): 23-35.
[5] Beaman, Lori, et al. "Powerful women: does exposure reduce bias?." *The Quarterly journal of economics* 124.4 (2009): 1497-1540.
[6] Beaman, Lori, et al. "Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: A policy experiment in India." *science* 335.6068 (2012): 582-586.

women. A burgeoning literature demonstrates the importance of localized women's movements for women's political participation and representation.[7]

In part, this coordinated action amongst women has resulted from the non-political organization of women by both NGOs and the Government of India into Self-Help Groups, informal savings and lending groups. In the last five years, India has seen a drastic rise in women's groups through the mobilization of more than 70 million women into Self-Help Groups. Previous research has documented how participation in Self-Help Groups can yield substantial increases in women's non-voting political participation.[8] This research goes on to suggest that this positive effect is largely the result of women's collective action to jointly demand representation and combat backlash from men.

While there is much progress still to be made, current trends incite an optimism around a trajectory of increased political and social empowerment for women. In the past several decades, women have ignited change by standing for election, turning out to the ballot boxes at unprecedented rates, and building grassroots movements of women demanding both representation and improved governance.

The current COVID-19 crisis threatens to undo the gains made to women's social and political empowerment and alter the trajectory of continued gains to gender equality. First, the lockdown imposed to combat COVID-19 led to the rapid return of millions of largely male migrants from urban centers to villages. The return of male migrants to their households has consequences for women's autonomy and economic opportunities, potentially imposing greater social restrictions on women and flooding rural labor markets and in turn limiting women's opportunities. Second, the consequent economic crisis has led to widespread job loss and has disproportionately affected sectors dominated by women[9]. As Deshpande notes from her analysis of April 2020 survey data from 40,000 Indians, women's employment fell by nearly 40% post-COVID as compared to 30% for men and women reported much higher domestic workloads following the lock down. Given the ties between women's economic, social, and political empowerment, these short-run consequences of the COVID-19 crisis provide reason for concern. The existing evidence base around the constraints and consequences to women's collective action provides a useful blueprint for conceptualizing how to ensure women's continued empowerment trajectory in the face of the dual crises of a public health pandemic and economic distress.

---

[7] Ray, Raka, and Anna C. Korteweg. "Women's movements in the third world: Identity, mobilization, and autonomy." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25.1 (1999): 47-71.; Sanyal, Paromita. "From credit to collective action: The role of microfinance in promoting women's social capital and normative influence." *American sociological review* 74.4 (2009): 529-550.; Prillaman, Soledad. *Strength in numbers: How women's groups close India's political gender gap*. Working paper, 2017.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Deshpande, Ashwini. "The Covid-19 Pandemic and Lockdown: First Effects on Gender Gaps in Employment and Domestic Work in India." *Working paper, 2020*.

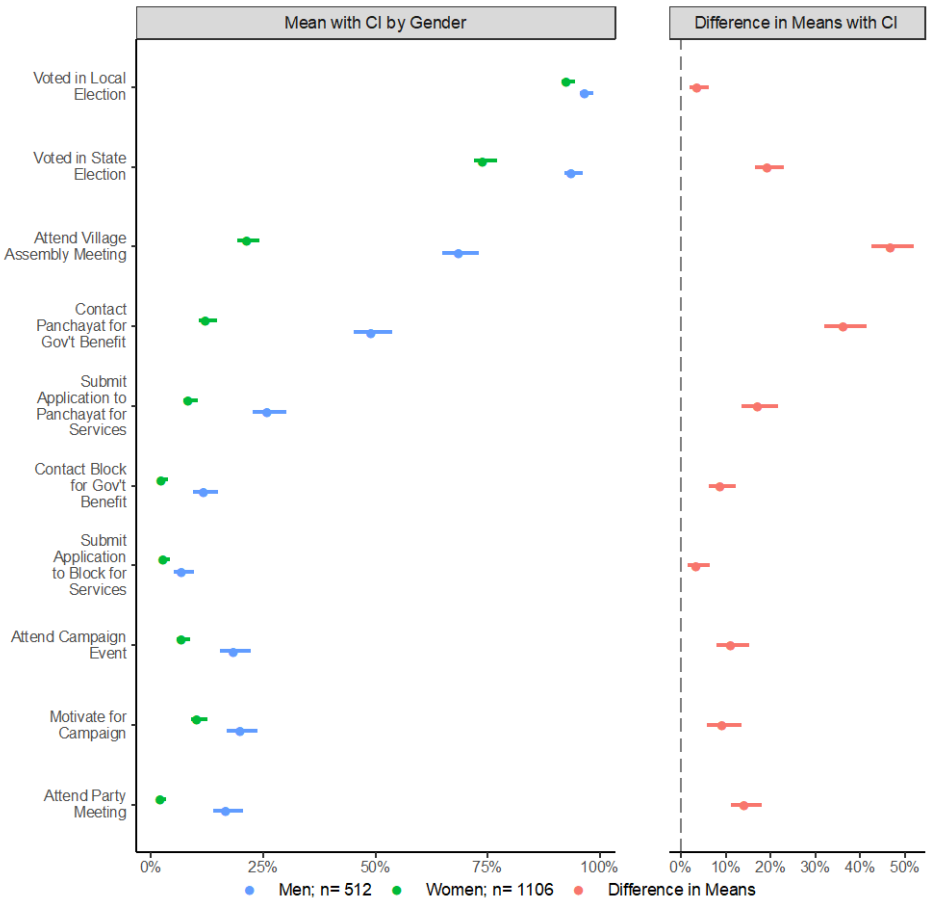


Figure 1: The gender gap in political participation by citizens in rural Madhya Pradesh

Roots of Collective Action

Understanding the systems that keep women out of politics can provide important insights into the mechanisms that drive women's political inclusion. In recent work, I argue that a critical factor for women's political inclusion is their ability to collectively mobilize to demand representation. Under patriarchal social norms, where women's identity is tied to the household and where politics is seen as the domain of men, women to a much greater extent than men face coercive threats and pressures to prioritize the household. Outside the household, political participation bears a disproportionate social cost for women, where they and their household may face punishment and backlash for women's norm violation as a result of engagement in political spaces.[10] In the face of persistent social norms and consequent backlash, collective action amongst women is likely to be necessary to combat the social forces of coercion aimed at excluding women from political spaces.

Yet how do women come to act in unison in the face of exclusionary norms that not only exclude them from political spaces in the first place but also inhibit their development of social capital?

[10] Brule, Rachel. "Reform, Representation and Resistance: The Politics of Property Rights' Enforcement." (2018).

Collective action seems an impossible task without a fundamental shift in the norms that limit women's political action in the first place.

The recent spate of programs aimed at women's economic empowerment presents an unanticipated and unintended opportunity to foster women's collective action. Over the last several decades, there has been a proliferation of programs aimed at women's financial inclusion and income generation.[11] Women have also become the target beneficiaries of many development interventions aimed more broadly at household income growth in the hopes that women will invest these funds in household needs.[12] While the majority of these programs have not intentionally aimed to increase women's political participation or even social empowerment, the nature of their design may unintentionally generate gains in these areas. For example, a core design feature of most microfinance programs is group lending. Group lending necessitates group meetings. When women are the sole beneficiaries of such programs, this amounts to sustained, regularized, and institutionalized meetings of women. Regular meetings of this sort, even if their core intent is for financial transactions, have been shown to increase women's social ties and social capital.[13]

In India, one such program promotes the creation of Self-Help Groups – small, federated, village-level micro-credit groups of women. Across India, Self-Help Groups have become a cornerstone of policy aimed at women's empowerment, becoming the largest poverty alleviation program in the world with more than 70 million women joining Self-Help Groups as part of the National Rural Livelihoods Program organized by the Government of India's Ministry of Rural Development and innumerable others joining similar programs organized by State governments and NGOs.

Recent evidence suggests that such programs have contributed to the "silent revolution" and the rise in grassroots women's movements across India.[14] In a recent paper that draws on a natural experiment in program rollout, I show that the mere introduction of these groups with only their pure economic programming leads to women's collective action and subsequently doubles the likelihood that women will participate in politics. These effects were concentrated almost entirely within women who joined Self-Help Groups as opposed to suggesting a broader change in women's political participation. Specifically, the evidence from this study suggests that the increase in political participation amongst women is driven in large part by coordinated action amongst groups: looking only at villages with Self-Help Groups, villages in which Self-Help Groups discussed politics and articulated a collective agenda around political action saw the greatest rise in women's political engagement.

These women's groups in many respects act as laboratories for democratic deliberation, providing an institutional space for women to experiment with political voice and civic engagement. Through political dialogue over repeated interactions, women explore their political preferences and interests, practice deliberation, develop confidence and authority, and accumulate civic skills useful for costly political action.

---

[11] Banerjee, Abhijit Vinayak. "Microcredit under the microscope: what have we learned in the past two decades, and what do we need to know?." *Annu. Rev. Econ.* 5.1 (2013): 487-519.
[12] Duflo, Esther. "Women empowerment and economic development." *Journal of Economic literature* 50.4 (2012): 1051-79.; Jayachandran, Seema. "The roots of gender inequality in developing countries." *economics* 7.1 (2015): 63-88.
[13] Feigenberg, Benjamin, Erica Field, and Rohini Pande. "The economic returns to social interaction: Experimental evidence from microfinance." *Review of Economic Studies* 80.4 (2013): 1459-1483.
[14] Prillaman, 2017.

Observing the success of Self-Help Groups in women's social and political empowerment, implementation organizations have begun to design programs aimed at catalyzing and augmenting the power of SHGs for collective action. One of the first movers in this space, PRADAN along with Jagori, developed a curriculum for Self-Help Groups to raise women's awareness of gender equality issues and women's rights and to provide women with the tools to direct their collective action potential towards advocating for their needs and interests. In partnership with PRADAN, I designed a randomized control trial to understand what happens to women's collective action and political behavior when these *groups* receive this gender equality program. Such an evaluation, funded in part by EDI through CEGA, presents an opportunity to not only learn how to catalyze group-based collective action amongst women but to also learn about the roots of when and how women choose to collective act to demand representation.

Preliminary pilot results generate substantial optimism. Figure 2 compares three types of villages across levels of women's political participation in multiple domains. The first type of village, pure control villages, are those which did not have access to the SHG program in any form. The second type of village, SHG only, are those which had the PRADAN SHG intervention but did not have the additional training curriculum related to gender equality; these villages are the control group in the randomized control trial. The third type of village, SHG + civics training, are those which had both the PRADAN SHG intervention and where SHG members received the gender equality curriculum; these villages are the treatment group in the randomized control trial.

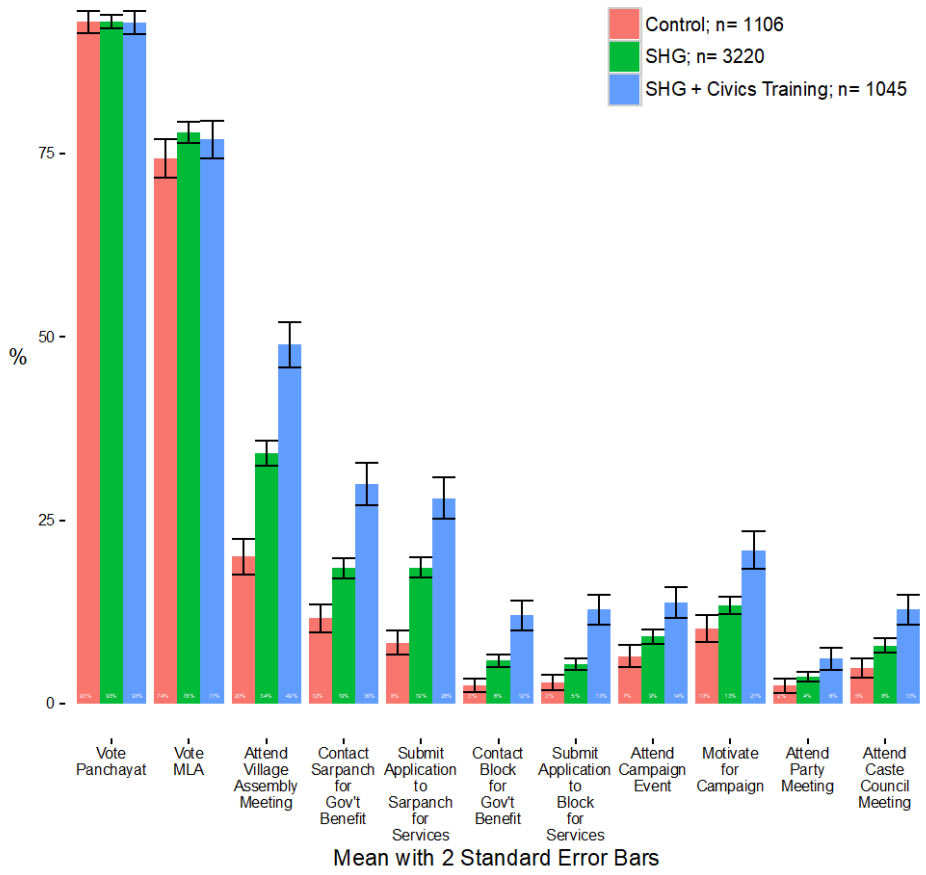
First, comparing women in villages with SHGs and women in villages without SHGs shows the results reported in detail in Prillaman (2017): women's political participation increases substantially simply as a result of having access to regularly meeting credit groups. Second, comparing women in villages with SHGs with and without the gender equality training demonstrates that these trainings further increase women's political participation above and beyond the effect of the group alone.

Why did this training program generate greater levels of political engagement amongst women, rivalling levels of engagement observed among men (see Figure 1)? The preliminary evidence suggests that this program helped to transform these economic groups into spaces for political dialogue, which prompted greater collective action by women. By fostering political discussion, the gender equality trainings opened the group space to become political. In other words, it transformed these economic networks into political networks. It activated the latent collective action potential through a recognition of shared interests rooted in gender-based discrimination and oriented those demands towards collective action via the state.

Importantly, the preliminary results from this gender equality training program stand in contrast to evaluations of other civics education programs, which generally find either no effect or a *negative* effect on women's political participation.[15] While direct comparisons would highlight several differences in implementation and curriculum (as well as differences in context given Gottlieb's study was implemented in Mali), it is worth noting that a key difference between these two programs is the composition of the group receiving the program. In the civics training program evaluated by Gottlieb (2016), training was provided to groups composed of both men and women. In the program studied here, the training was provided to groups comprised of only women. One possible explanation for differences in outcomes could be the need for women to engage in spaces held only

[15] Gottlieb, Jessica. "Greater expectations: A field experiment to improve accountability in Mali." *American Journal of Political Science* 60.1 (2016): 143-157.

for women either because the set of shared interests are more likely to ignite collective action or because women fear norm violation when they see men receiving similar information. In fact, Gottlieb (2016) attributes the negative effects on women as a compensation for contra-norm behavior (attending the trainings) by reducing their civic participation.



Development-oriented Action

I have suggested that women have organized and initiated collective action in order to redress persistent inequalities in the representation of women and women's interests. Qualitative evidence from interviews with more than 100 Self-Help Group members suggests that women's collective action is often oriented towards two core goals: reducing the incidence of violence against women and demanding more effective and programmatic delivery of core public services such as water, sanitation, and food security (see also Sanyal 2009). With respect to the former, dialogue with other women via these group institutions generates an understanding of shared experiences of violence or fear of violence. Many female interviewees noted how they were unaware of the incidence of domestic violence in their community until they engaged in dialogue with their group members and believed themselves to be the only one in the community experiencing such problems. Given the challenges with legal change at the local level, this shared recognition often led to the development of non-state-oriented action aimed at increasing social stigma and informal enforcement of violence

against women. For example, Sangita bai[16] recounts how her Self-Help Group joined with those in three neighboring villages to rally for a ban on alcohol in their villages, often seen as a driving force behind domestic abuse:

> "Women from the Self-Help Groups in Mordongri, Lakhapur, and Thanimal villages got together and planned a rally for deaddiction and alcohol prohibition. Alcohol should be totally banned in all the villages. After the rally, we went to Mordongri. From Mordongri we went to Tapadhana. Women went to every house and broke the pots of alcohol. We even threw away the furnace." (Interview, December 2018)

In addition to action oriented around gender-based violence, women described their desire to improve the delivery of services that were either unavailable or poorly administered. In doing so, they demanded accountability from elected officials in the implementation of local policy and sought programmatic provision of services historically delivered via clientelistic exchange. Sangita bai notes how in addition to their campaign against alcohol, "through the group we gave applications for toilets, for roads, for a bridge, and for water. For a hand pump."

In some villages, Self-Help Groups have gone so far as to take control over the implementation of entire government programs. While visiting a village in Bihar, seen by the government as an exemplar of the Self-Help Group program, I saw firsthand how the entire Public Distribution System – the system for distributing subsidized food grains to below the poverty line households – was run by the Self-Help Groups after recognition that the local government could not and did not do so effectively. As in this case, these groups are lauded for their efficacy in development-oriented action. This support and praise from higher level government officials and more broadly from the community benefitting from the action, further helps these groups to stand against any backlash they may face as a result of norm violation.

Parallel Institutions of Governance

Not only has the proliferation of Self-Help Groups generated collective action amongst women, but in doing so it has also created a set of women's institutions at the local level parallel to local government bodies. Given the cohesion and efficacy of these institutions in collective action, and the orientation of this collective action towards broader development and public goods provision, Self-Helps groups in much of India have taken on and been tasked with public service delivery. The contrast between the lack of transparency and efficiency in the implementation of many government programs by state officials and the efficacy of Self-Help Groups has led to the direct investment in these informal institutions.

When asked what villagers think about Self-Help Groups in the village, Gita bai[17] replied,

> "Villagers say that they themselves have not attempted nor accomplished the amount of work that the SHG has done. Men in the village especially say that whatever work men have not been able to do, women have gotten it done and shown how." (Interview, December 2018)

[16] Pseudonym used to protect interviewee identity.

[17] Pseudonym used to protect interviewee identity.

These experiences highlight several important insights around gendered political behavior, including how collective action particularly by under-represented political actors can drive more responsive and effective governance and how and when women's representation can bring about greater development.

COVID Relief through Self-Help Groups

In the wake of COVID-19, Self-Help groups have taken on the important role of preparing rural India for the health crisis and providing important relief services for the country as a whole. In an example of the extraordinary organizational power of these women's institutions, Self-Help Groups have filled gaps in manufacturing, producing more than 165 million masks, 500,000 liters of hand sanitizer, and nearly 500,000 other personal protective equipment. They have taken on important roles in public health by rapidly disseminating information about COVID-19 and necessary health and safety measures to every corner of India, filling gaps in the public health care system. During this crisis, Self-Help Groups have continued to fill the gaps in local public goods provisions by opening and managing more than 120,000 community kitchens to combat hunger in the face of severe economic hardship. All of this despite a moratorium on the meeting of Self-Help Groups in response to safety protocols during the pandemic.

Much of this reaction to COVID-19 has been autonomous, with Self-Help Groups recognizing the gaps in existing institutional structures and the needs of their immediate communities and drawing on their organizational capacity to fill these needs. The government has further encouraged Self-Help Groups in pursuing these tasks as a result of a recognition of the efficacy of these informal institutions in filling these needs. As states by Junaid Ahmad, the World Bank's country director in India, "Women at the center of development has been an important story in South Asia. In these extraordinary times, when we are all united in our fight against the COVID-19 virus, these women's groups are playing a critical role".[18]

The COVID-19 crisis has provided a lens to notice and observe how women's collective action and political engagement can improve service delivery and government performance, providing optimism for both women's continued empowerment and for the effective functioning of government institutions. If this invigorated collective action amongst women sustains beyond the lock down and can be channeled to address the long-term economic challenges that will strike women particularly hard and elevate women's status in their communities, it is possible that the COVID-19 crisis may disrupt long-stable equilibria. If, alternately, the lockdown inhibits the formation and meeting of SHGs, it may prove difficult to sustain current levels of women's collective action and develop new institutions that foster collective action more broadly. Furthermore, it is yet unknown whether the collective action generated amongst SHGs can be channeled to fight for women's access to economic opportunities when such opportunities are scarce. Much of women's collective action to date has been targeted at improving public goods and therefore has received wide support. Women's continued empowerment post-COVID will require collective action geared at disrupting social hierarchies, which is likely to generate resistance from those with a stake in the status quo.

[18] "In India, women's Self-Help Groups combat the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic." *The World Bank,* 11 April 2020.

The uncertain future of women in India post-COVID highlights the importance of continued investment and evidence-building around optimal strategies for igniting and supporting women's collective action as well as the development of an evidence base around the consequences of women's collective action for service delivery and governance.

The Importance of Women's Collective Action

Across the globe, women as citizens remain under-represented in political spaces. Nowhere is this more evident than in South Asia. Drawing on data from the World Values Survey, Figure 3 reports the reported gender gap in both voter turnout and participation in any political space. Almost nowhere in the world do women participate in politics more than men, with the exception of voting in North America, and the gap in non-electoral political participation is striking and substantial particularly in regions of the world with a high proportion of low and middle income countries. South Asia stands out for near parity between men and women in voter turnout, the most commonly used gauge of political engagement, and yet the sizable gender inequality in non-electoral political participation (20 percentage points). Clearly there is more work to be done in redressing inequities in political access.

Yet the value of the growing political movement by women -- the "silent revolution" -- is clear. Not only are women gaining access to spaces long seen as outside women's domain, but through their coordinated action they are ensuring that their voices are heard. Even more, as an exemplification of the power of women's collective action, grassroots women's movements across India have gone beyond expectation and explicitly filled the gaps where the state has failed, demanding improved public goods provision and in some cases even taking on the delivery of important public services.

What remains less clear is how to appropriately support and foster women's movements so that they accomplish their starting goal: the elevation and representation of women's interests and needs. While women's collective action may be an important tool to foster broader development goals and improve the delivery of public services, it is critical that we understand how these *informal* institutions operate and how to best protection them from co-optation either for political gain or more innocuously for the representation of the interests of others. While checks and balances exist for formal government institutions, these informal women's institutions are self-governing despite any role they play in public service delivery. While this may raise concerns about the sustained efficacy of these groups in improving governance and development, it also raises concerns about the potential for this collective action to be channeled by external actors for service delivery unrelated to the interests of women.

The emergence of these groups as an institution of governance is recent. The long-run story of these grassroots women's movements has yet to be written. Yet we are at a moment in history to learn about the constraints on women's political representation, the process of redressing gender inequities in the face of persistent patriarchal norms, and ultimately the power of their collective action. The potential for inquiry and learning remains vast and yet critical to ensure forward movement in creating a more gender equal society.

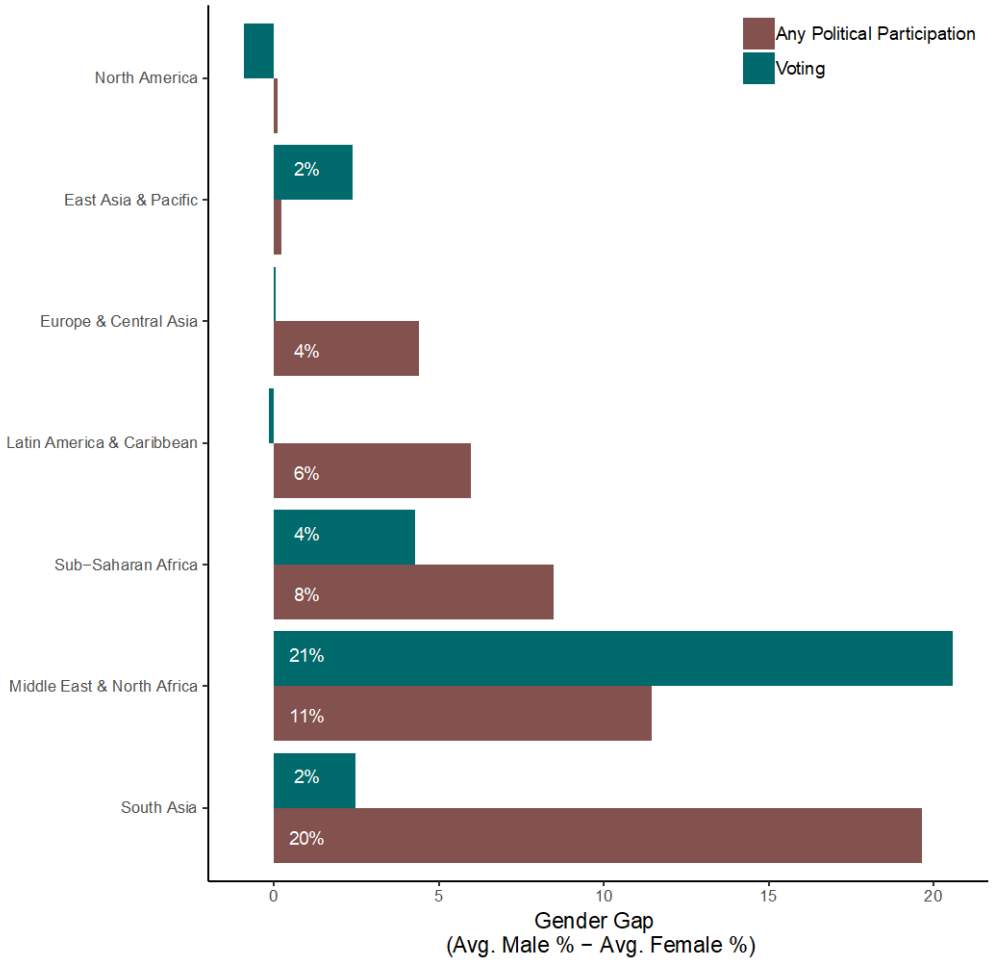


Figure 3: The gender gap in voting and non-voting political participation across the globe

About EDI

Institutions matter for growth and inclusive development, but there is little evidence on how positive institutional change can be achieved. The Economic Development and Institutions (EDI) research programme addresses this knowledge gap by working with some of the finest economic thinkers and social scientists across the globe to inform new pathways to inclusive, sustainable economic growth.

Policy engagement is a critical focus for EDI research. We engage with policymakers and influencers throughout the design and development of our research programmes. EDI Research Insights and Policy Briefs are published at various stages of research to distil evidence and synthesise key findings for general and policy-focused audiences.

This project was funded with UK aid from the UK government. For more information, please visit: www.edi.opml.co.uk

EDI publications represent the views of the authors, and are not necessarily held or endorsed by the programme or its partner organizations.

© Economic Development & Institutions