

BRIEFCASE

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RAISING FEMALE LEADERS

A quota system for female village leaders in India changed perceptions of women's abilities, improved women's electoral chances, and raised aspirations and educational attainment for adolescent girls.



In 2008, women accounted for 18 percent of parliament members worldwide, and only 13 countries had a female head of government. In response to this underrepresentation, more than one hundred countries have introduced affirmative action policies for women in public office. In an effort to increase women's participation in politics in India, a 1993 constitutional amendment mandated that a randomly selected third of leadership positions at every level of local government be reserved for women.

The hope is that such a quota system, beyond its immediate impact on gender balance among leaders, will have long-term effects on women's status in society by changing perceptions of their leadership capabilities and shaping beliefs about what they can achieve. However, until recently, little research has been done on the longer-term impact of quota systems.

IPAL affiliates Lori Beaman, Raghubendra Chattopadhyay, Esther Duflo, and Rohini Pande, together with Petia Topalova, used the random variation in exposure to female leaders mandated by the constitutional amendment to examine the medium- and long-term impacts of reservation on perceptions of women leaders, the aspirations of adolescents and their parents, and girls' schooling attainment in India.

- The reservation policy led to significant electoral gains for women in subsequent, unreserved elections, but only after two rounds of quotas. In the 2008 election in India, the proportion of female candidates elected significantly increased in villages that had reservations for women in the previous two elections, compared to villages that had never been reserved.
- Repeated exposure to a female leader changed villagers'—especially men's—perceptions of women's ability to lead effectively. The reservation policy reduced the association of women with domestic activities and improved male villagers' evaluation of female leaders' effectiveness.
- Exposure to female leaders heightened adolescent girls' career aspirations and increased their level of educational attainment. Compared to villages that never had reservations for a female leader, the gender gap in aspirations closed significantly for adolescents in villages assigned to a female leader for two election cycles. The presence of a female leader also erased the gender gap in adolescent educational attainment and caused girls to spend less time on household chores.

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