

Authors

Esther Duflo
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Unappreciated Service: Performance, Perceptions, and Women
Leaders in India

Esther Duflo and Petia Topalova

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Abstract

This paper studies the impact of reservation for women on the performance of policy makers and on voters' perceptions of this performance. Since the mid 1990's, one third of Village Council head positions in India have been randomly reserved for a woman: In these councils only women could be elected to the position of chief. Village Councils are responsible for the provision of many local public goods in rural areas. Using a data set which combines individual level data on satisfaction with public services with independent assessments of the quality of public facilities, we compare objective measures of the quantity and quality of public goods, and information about how villagers evaluate the performance of male and female leaders. Overall, villages reserved for women leaders have more public goods, and the measured quality of these goods is at least as high as in non-reserved villages. Moreover, villagers are less likely to pay bribes in villages reserved for women. Yet, residents of villages headed by women are less satisfied with the public goods, including goods that are beyond the jurisdiction of the Panchayat. This may help explain why women rarely win elections even though they appear to be at least as effective leaders along observable dimensions, and are less corrupt.

Keywords: Gender, Decentralization, Affirmative Action, Political Economy

Relative to their share in the population, women are under-represented in all political positions. In June 2000, women comprised 13.8% of all parliament members in the world, up from

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