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Sample Size

2,000 individuals in 44 villages

Research Implemented by IPA

Yes

The Effect of Grassroots Civic Education Programs on Women's Political Participation

Abstract

Women face significant barriers to participation and leadership in politics and government in many countries, including Ghana. Shortly before Ghana's 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections, researchers evaluated whether community meetings focused on encouraging women's participation in local politics could close the gender gap that exists in grassroots politics. The evaluation found no change in women's political participation or in views of gender norms in local politics. The program was hampered in part by its incomplete implementation, including by local political party leaders who may have feared an electorally-risky association with a controversial social message. This study highlights the limitations of common civic education approaches used in the developing world.

Policy Issue

Women face significant barriers to participation and leadership in politics and government in many new democracies, including Ghana.¹ When women are underrepresented, their influence on community decisions may be limited, and they may be less likely to have access to resources available to the politically-active and well connected. Recent research has also suggested that the exclusion of women from local-level decision making positions can hold back local economic development.² These barriers include social norms that politics is a “man’s game” and that men, rather than women, should take on leadership roles. Public forums that aim to challenge these norms may be an effective way to lower barriers to women’s political participation.

Context of the Evaluation

This study took place in the Eastern and Central Regions of Ghana, where a large gender gap existed in political participation before the program started, according to baseline data. Male respondents were 14 percentage points more likely to be political party members than female respondents (59 percent vs. 45 percent). There were also clear social norms against women participating in politics: 48 percent of the men and 37 percent of the women surveyed preferred that only men hold local leadership positions.

In an effort to increase women’s political participation, the National Commission for Civic Education implemented a civic education campaign: They held large community meetings, called *durbars*, which were presided over by the traditional chief and emphasized the value of women’s participation in local politics. The commission hoped that the communal nature of the *durbars* would show women that others in the community would support their greater participation.

Details of the Intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to measure of the impact of civic education campaign on women’s participation in local party organizations, men’s and women’s attitudes towards women’s political participation, the campaign strategies of local party branches, and women’s access to the patronage resources controlled by political parties.

Forty-four communities were randomly assigned either to the program group, which received the *durbars*, or to a comparison group which did not. The *durbars* were held in the months before the December 2016 elections and included three main elements:

1. **Keynote speech by NCCE:** First, the commission’s district officer delivered a keynote speech that emphasized the importance of including women in community decisions, described examples of local women who have successfully participated in public life, acknowledged and argued against common criticisms women face for becoming politically active, and encouraged women to become more involved during the election.

1. **Drama presentation:** Second, a local secondary school drama troupe performed a skit in which a woman successfully overcomes the skepticism of male community members, including that of her own husband, to join a political party and make a positive impact in her community through a community clean-up exercise.
1. **Political party speeches:** Finally, local leaders from each political party—chairmen and women’s organizers—gave speeches encouraging women to become active members of their parties.

Surveys were conducted on men and women before the durbars and after the 2016 elections to measure impacts on political participation and attitudes.

Results and Policy Lessons

Overall, the durbars failed to change rates of women’s participation or change community members’ attitudes about the appropriateness of women’s participation. Researchers found that neither men nor women in communities where durbars were held were more likely to have participated in local politics than those in the comparison group. The durbars also had no effect on the attitudes of either men or women toward women’s political participation. These results suggest that the durbars were unsuccessful at achieving the project’s main goals.

On the other hand, the study found no evidence that the durbars sparked a backlash against women’s participation. In other settings, some initiatives aimed at increasing the local representation and participation of women have engendered backlash from men and had negative effects, but this does not appear to have been the case here.

One possible reason for the lack of impact may be that the program was not consistently implemented. Also, surveys suggested some attendees misunderstood the main message of the durbars. Many responses indicated that they thought the meetings were about peaceful elections (33 percent) or voting procedures (42 percent), while only 18 percent noted women’s participation. Moreover, 15 percent of self-reported attendees thought the durbar’s main message was about sanitation, perhaps as a result of the drama presentation including a community clean-up exercise.

The research suggests that, if used, future durbars should have simple and consistently-implemented messages. However, alternative methods of civic education may be more effective.

Sources

[1] Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Duflo, Esther. 2012. “Women’s Empowerment and Economic Development.” *Journal of Economic Literature* 50(4):1051–79.

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