PART 1

THE PUZZLE OF WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
I

Introduction

On a hot summer day in 2015, I sat down alongside Sushila, a middle-aged woman who is the leader of her village’s women’s movement.⁠¹ We sat on a woven cotton blanket on her front porch sipping chai while she recounted her transformation from being a woman constrained to the domestic sphere and forbidden to leave her house without permission into being a woman with power and voice in village politics today. Sushila’s personal transformation mirrored a transformation in her village, where historically women were not even political outsiders, but seen as apolitical, and now are a political force to be reckoned with.

Reflecting on years past, Sushila shared that she was married at the age of twenty to a man she had met only once. As is customary in much of India, she moved in with her husband and his parents just after they got married. This left Sushila more than 100 kilometers from her family and the friendships she had developed throughout childhood and adolescence. In her new village, her only ties were through her husband. She grew nostalgic as she reflected on her life before marriage, stating simply that during that time, “she was free.” Her prior freedom stood in stark contrast to her life after marriage, where Sushila fulfilled the set of obligations expected of her as caretaker of the house despite her own desire to work. Instead, she was expected to cook and clean so that her husband could tend to the small plot of land that was their primary source of income.

¹ This recounting constitutes my recollection and interpretation of a day spent with Sushila (pseudonym). While I have attempted to tell her story, to the best of my ability, as she shared it with me, I have inevitably imposed my experience and position onto this account. It is also important to acknowledge that even what Sushila shared with me that day is undoubtedly a function of my position as a non-Indian foreigner. For these reasons, I share women’s own words to describe their lived experiences from their perspectives as much as possible throughout this book.
Sushila also helped harvest the crops and tend to the soil, but her family (like most official definitions) did not consider this work. The customary assumption is that he who plows the fields reaps the financial rewards from the crops. Yet plowing is the exclusive purview of men. And so, despite putting in much of the work to harvest and produce the crops sold at the market, Sushila received no credit for her family’s earnings from the land.

Like most of the women I spoke to over six years of fieldwork in rural India, Sushila’s life revolved around her domain: the household. She fetched the water, prepared the meals, and cared for her children, spending the majority of her day inside the house. The presiding norms – the invisible rules arbitrating which behaviors were deemed possible and permissible and which merited social sanction – defined the division of labor in Sushila’s house as well as where she was allowed to travel, to whom she could speak, and how she was expected to spend her time. Sushila’s husband, Nandkishor, spent the majority of his days outside the house. He would leave in the morning to work in their fields or take their crops to market. When he completed his business, he would often spend time in the village center, chatting with other men before returning home. Nandkishor, like most men, did not need to ask permission to leave the village, go to the market, or socialize with others in the community.

Even as I spoke with Sushila, a cluster of men sat together huddled around a deck of cards a few hundred yards away. Sushila said it was common for men in the village to sit together to drink and gamble. To Sushila, these activities were not merely reflective of the differences in the social lives of men and women, but tied to more insidious challenges faced by women in her village. She shared that alcoholism was a challenge in their village and that many women lived in fear of male aggression. She told me about a woman in a nearby village who had approached the local elected official to help her file a legal claim against her husband for regularly assaulting her while intoxicated. The official suggested adjudicating the matter informally rather than taking it to the courts. He convened a meeting of the family, at which he chastised her husband for the violence he perpetrated. He told the woman that she need not approach the police, as the matter was now resolved. This story had convinced Sushila that her local institutions would not protect her from men’s violence and power.

Sushila, like women in much of the world, is subject to a political order rooted in patriarchy, the de facto allocation of power to elder males. This

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2 While the vast majority of the fieldwork I conducted was in Madhya Pradesh, I spent long periods of time in rural Bihar and Odisha, which also inform my analysis.

3 This recounting reflects the importance of informal institutions in adjudicating conflict in rural India. More than 85 percent of village disputes are handled by customary (often caste-based) village councils, which are almost exclusively run by men (Krishna 2002a).
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The patriarchal political order is marked by the absence of women and the centrality of men in most domains of politics and the devaluation of women’s voices in political decision-making. This book exposes the patriarchal political order and documents its tangled relationship with many structures of political power.

Many have called attention to the persistent and prevalent gender inequalities in politics, noting women’s underrepresentation in electoral office, at the ballot box, and in other interactions with the state. Such inequalities are most prevalent in the Global South: World Values Survey data (2005–2022) reveal in Figure 1.1 that men participate in politics in these countries at substantially higher rates than women (reflected in the positive gender gaps). These inequalities have largely been attributed to characteristics that men have but women lack: money, time, skills, social status, inclinations, and opportunities. According to these arguments, women could enter politics if only they had what men have; their level of engagement in politics is their (often rational) response under these constraints.

FIGURE 1.1 Gender gaps in political participation in democracies across the globe

Note: Data are from the World Values Survey, Waves 5–7, representing 2005–2022 (Inglehart et al. 2014). Except where noted, data are for democratic countries only, as defined by an average polity score from 2005 to 2018 of greater than 6 (polity V data documented by Marshall and Gurr 2021). In total, the data represent ninety-one democracies and two non-democracies in South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh). Voting is measured as those that report turning out to vote in the most recent national election (wave 6) or that they usually or always vote in national elections (waves 5 and 7). Non-electoral participation includes respondents who reported protesting, petitioning, striking, political occupation, or other political action. “Don’t knows” are coded as not participating. Responses are weighted by the population survey weight provided.
Yet there is an important and unexplained puzzle in women’s political participation: while women are markedly less politically present than men between elections, women vote at high rates, almost equal to those of men (see Figure 1.1). This pattern of substantially larger gender gaps in non-electoral political participation is present across democracies in the Global South, but nowhere is it more acute than in India, where the gender gap is roughly 2 percentage points for voting, but nearly 20 percentage points for non-electoral political participation. More than half of the women who voted on election day were absent from politics afterward. In fact, India has the lowest level of women’s non-electoral political participation of the ninety-one democratic countries surveyed.

Why do women vote but not participate in politics between elections? Prior explanations of gendered political behavior fail to explain this puzzling pattern of participation, rarely distinguishing between the drivers of electoral and non-electoral political behavior. Yet they provide two foundational explanations of gendered political behavior: women’s relatively lower levels of political participation are due to resource inequalities (lack of money, time, and skills) and social inequalities (lack of social status and inclination). Access to resources lowers the costs of political participation by facilitating the accumulation of relevant information and easing the financial and procedural barriers to participation. Social inequalities, largely seen as the product of norms that socialize women into domestic and docile roles and sanction those who deviate from these prescribed roles, also condition the costs and perceived benefits of political participation.

The Middle East and North Africa are exceptions regarding electoral gender gaps; on average, 20 percentage points fewer women report voting than men.

The World Values Survey only captures forms of political participation that can be consistently and reliably measured across countries and time. As a result, many of the more nuanced and context-specific forms of political participation, most of which occur between elections, are not represented. Chapter 2 presents evidence from an original survey in India that the patterns presented in Figure 1.1 replicate when accounting for a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of political behavior.

The Puzzle of Women’s Political Participation

Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) posit that male dominance and, more specifically, gendered differences in political preferences derive from inequalities in bargaining power rooted in women’s lack of resources and opportunities. Schlozman, Burns, and Verba (1994) and Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) explain women’s lower levels of political participation as resulting, in part, from a lack of resources (money, skills, and networks). Similarly, Carpena and Jensenius (2021) find that delayed marriage – which leads women to have more education and more free time after marriage – is associated with higher levels of political participation. Brulé and Gaikwad (2021) also find that a lack of economic resources, principally control over land, explains lower levels of political participation in patrilineal societies compared to matrilineal societies.

Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) suggest that women’s lesser authority in political deliberation is the result of a lack of opportunity (driven by institutional characteristics) and inclination (driven by socialization). Similarly, Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) highlight the role of socialization in limiting women’s political interest and, in turn, participation. Focusing on inclination, Barnes and Burchard (2013) show that having more women in elite positions of political power who can act as...
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Both explanations yield an expectation that development, and its consequent economic growth and norm renegotiation, will improve women’s political participation. Economic growth is assumed to generate political inclusion, and accordingly, the gendered lag in access to economic prosperity perpetuates women’s exclusion. Economic growth increases incomes, expands job opportunities, and improves state capacity and, as a result, service provision. Such economic gains enable households to invest more evenly in both genders; therefore, economic growth ensures more gender-equal access to the constituents of development: health, education, and earning opportunities. Women’s greater access to economic resources increases their bargaining power within the household and provides easier access to information, broader networks outside the household, and incentives to invest in young girls' education. Even cultural- or norm-based explanations of women’s exclusion suggest that the norms constraining women’s behavior are most likely to erode when they gain economic power. As the value of women’s production rises (as opposed to their value in reproduction), norms related to which behaviors are considered acceptable for women tend to shift. Girls are then socialized alongside boys into roles associated with economic productivity.

But these economic and social inequalities are only half of the story. Many of these models treat women as atomized individuals endowed with resources and symbols of possibility and acceptability translates into greater female political participation (see also Desposato and Norrander (2009)). Robinson and Gottlieb (2019) suggest that cultural norms shape political behavior by facilitating coordination around gender roles and acceptable behaviors and, in turn, privileging certain strategy sets and equilibria.

8 These ideas were originally touted in modernization theory (for example in Lipset (1959) and Inkeles (1969)), which suggested that democratic values of inclusion follow industrialization. While modernization theory has been widely contested and discredited, the idea that inclusion often follows growth (albeit for different reasons than modernization theory posits) has remained (Jayachandran (2015)). Norris and Inglehart (2001), for example, suggest that growth and industrialization often bring more women into the workforce, therefore creating a larger pool of qualified women as potential political candidates, which yields equalizing changes in gender norms (see also Reynolds (1999)).

9 Goldin (2006); Duflo (2012).

10 Bargaining models of the household attribute exit options and bargaining power to women’s economic opportunities, particularly labor force participation and income (Manser and Brown 1980; McElroy and Horney 1981; Lundberg and Pollak 1994; Agarwal 1997; Pollak 2005; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010). Additionally, studies have shown that changes in the structure of the economy that increase women’s earning potential vis-à-vis men yield increased investment in young girls (Qian 2008; Doepke and Tertilt 2009; Pitt, Rosenzweig, and Hassan 2012; Carranza 2014).

11 Brulé and Gaikwad (2021); Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014).

12 Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) most notably define norms as a product of the structure of the economy and the legal institutions regulating marriages, in the same way that political preferences and behavior are a product of the same structures.
constraints that either facilitate or hinder their political action. But they fail to identify how physical and psychological coercion constrain women’s political agency and action. Feminist theorists and scholars of empowerment (who largely emanate from the Global South and South Asia in particular) have long drawn attention to the coercive structures that control women’s behavior. They focus on the concepts of freedom and agency, or the ability to act in line with one’s strategic life goals, as pivotal to our understanding of gender inequities. In the domain of politics, feminist theorists have honed in on the household as a locus of disempowerment for women. More recent research, also largely rooted in South Asia, has empirically shown how household members manipulate and constrain women’s political behavior.

I combine these two paradigms – rational and coercive explanations of women’s political behavior – and proffer a strategic answer to the puzzle of women’s political participation: many women participate in politics only when it serves the interests of men. Women’s voting is of benefit to men in systems of clientelist mobilization (where electoral support is exchanged for private benefits), while their more general political participation threatens male authority without reaping rewards for men.

While it is true that many women lack the resources that incline and support men’s political action, these resources alone do not explain the variance in women’s political participation. In addition, we must ask: who benefits from women’s political exclusion? On close inspection, it is the men in Sushila’s community, including those in her household and the elites who run village institutions, that inhibit agency. See also Folbre (2021). Past research has highlighted how social and normative institutions shape women’s behavior, but mostly still presumes that women rationally respond to this set of institutional circumstances (Inglehart and Norris (2000); Iversen and Rosenbluth (2001); Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001); Robinson and Gottlieb (2019); Brulé and Gaikwad (2021)).

As I describe in greater detail in Chapter 3, see the works of Sen (1985, 1995, 1999), Batiwala (1993), Kabeer (1999), and Nussbaum (2000) for an understanding of the empowerment (also known as capabilities) approach. This approach highlights the importance of individual agency as an indicator of welfare, as opposed to more traditional economic models of welfare maximization. Taking agency as the key subject of analysis forces a consideration of the factors (and actors) that inhibit agency. See also Folbre (2021). For a less coercive account, see Glaser (1999). As I describe in greater detail in Chapter 3, see the works of Sen (1985, 1995, 1999), Batiwala (1993), Kabeer (1999), and Nussbaum (2000) for an understanding of the empowerment (also known as capabilities) approach. This approach highlights the importance of individual agency as an indicator of welfare, as opposed to more traditional economic models of welfare maximization. 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politics, who gain from her submission to the political order and who have the power to (often violently) enforce this submission. Gendered patterns of social and economic inequalities and the capacity for coercion rooted in patriarchal norms and permissive legal structures delineate de facto authority and power and generate incentives to build and maintain a political order that maximizes men’s welfare – the patriarchal political order.17

The patriarchal political order is thus defined not only by women’s limited political participation but also by their political disempowerment – their inability to exercise free choice. For many women, men are the strategic actors deciding their political behavior. Or, more accurately, women are the pawns in men’s political games, enabling men to extract greater spoils.

At the center of these political games is the household. Patriarchy is fundamentally based on the allocation of power within the household to elder men. The household has long been considered a critical unit of analysis. It was once treated as a cohesive and aligned unit,18 but later revealed to be a space for bargaining and negotiation as household members navigate distinct preferences but joint decisions.19 In addition to being spaces of collective decision-making, households are domains of coercion. One in three women around the world reports violence at the hands of a male household member.20

In the patriarchal political order, the household is the fundamental unit of political organization. Thus, when men dominate the household, they dominate politics. In close-knit political communities like the thousands of villages in India, in which electoral patronage and clientelistic exchange are commonplace,21 political entrepreneurs benefit from organizing politics around households.22 By treating the household, the fundamental organizing social structure, as a political unit, the costs of political mobilization, particularly with patronage, are lower. But households are also the principal domain of patriarchy, where patriarchal hierarchies are most explicitly defined. Those with power, both legitimate and coercive, within the household, namely elder men, have

17 Similarly, Folbre (2021) provides a theory of gender inequality explained by the synergies of political, cultural, and economic institutions that unite to elevate male authority. Patriarchy, in her conception, is a structure of collective power built on interlocking institutions that circumscribe the opportunities available to people. Folbre (2021: 11) similarly argues that once these institutions are in place, they create incentives for those with power to maintain them: “strong groups often find ways to exploit weak groups and institutionalize their gain in ways that perpetuate their advantage.”
18 Becker (1981) most notably defined the household as a unitary actor with common preferences.
19 Manser and Brown (1980); McElroy and Horney (1981); Lundberg and Pollack (1994); Agarwal (1997); Pollak (2005); Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010).
21 Anderson, Francois, and Kotwal (2013); Bardhan and Mookherjee (2012); Auerbach (2016); Auerbach and Thachil (2018); Lehne, Shapiro, and Eynde (2018); Asher and Novosad (2017); Wilkinson (2006); Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007); Berenschot (2010).
22 Ronconi and Zarazaga (2019) show that clientelist brokers consider household size when making political offers.
incentives to maximize their personal gains from politics by subordinating other household members. Such systems of political mobilization and exchange under patriarchy thus benefit from the alignment of households (and the subordination of the women within them).  

In this book, I will show that households in rural India behave as a unit in political decision-making but that women’s agency is often subordinated by strategic and powerful men. The coercive unitary household enforces women’s voting and restricts women’s non-electoral participation because these responses align with the incentives of those with bargaining and coercive power in the household. The institutionalization of the coercive unitary household yields a structure of politics organized around identities shared within households (namely caste) and where men inhabit the center of village politics and women exist on the periphery. These facts align with a political order strategically built on women’s political exclusion and explain the puzzle of women’s political participation.

Women’s political exclusion therefore persists because it benefits those with economic, normative, and coercive power. No amount of money, education, social status, inclination, or opportunity will enable women’s political empowerment unless it also allows them to contest male coercion. Yet women can challenge this political order even where patriarchal norms remain strong, and without changes in their stocks of the resources thought to facilitate political action.

How is the patriarchal political order unraveled? Returning to my day with Sushila and her experiences at present, Sushila discussed a recent village assembly meeting, where she sat among a mass of women at the front. She described speaking up at the meeting as a representative of her women’s group and articulating their concerns – a lack of water, an absent teacher, and the prevalence of domestic violence at the hands of inebriated husbands – demanding responsiveness from local politicians. She also documented how this political action was met with challenges: her husband’s disapproval of her newfound political voice and the experience of being forcibly removed alongside other women from an earlier village meeting, as it “was not their place.” Yet she remained strident in her desire for women to politically mobilize.

Sushila’s public presence and informal community leadership mark a drastic shift from her life right after marriage. She attributes this change to her joining a women-only credit group, known in India as a self-help group (SHG), seven years prior. She joined this group so that she and her family could access

\[^{23}\text{Isaksson, Kotsadam, and Nerman (2014)}\text{ also document a link between the prevalence of clientelism and women’s political participation in Africa, showing that gender gaps are larger when clientelism is more prevalent.}\]

\[^{24}\text{Mohmand (2019)}\text{ documents how powerful men (landlords) can also suppress the political agency of socioeconomically lower status men (the landless). She, too, suggests that clientelism structures the way that collectives of the subordinate must navigate and sometimes defer to those with power to access the state.}\]
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cheaper credit and learn about new farming techniques. But when asked what has changed most in her life since joining the SHG, she replied decisively that it was the depth of her connection with other women in the community. She stated, “We overcame our fear when we met together. Alone, we were very frightened. We took each other’s support when we were together. With the support of our sisters, our fear disappeared gradually.”

I will show that women can gain autonomy from the household and challenge the patriarchal political order through collective action. This collective action is made possible by strong political ties, a common gender consciousness, and social solidarity among women. Sushila’s experiences reflect the power generated by women’s collective action. A credit group may seem an unlikely place for political empowerment. Yet, as I will causally demonstrate, such institutions enable women’s autonomy from the household and can in some cases build women’s social solidarity around a shared gender identity. In turn, this social solidarity can foster collective action to demand political agency and representation. Dense and solidaristic ties among women, built on norms of reciprocity and trust, channeled toward demands for political representation, are effective at increasing women’s political participation and countering subsequent male backlash.

This book documents the patriarchal political order and then unravels it by demonstrating the power of public policy and women’s action to reshape Indian women’s political lives. At its core, this book is about the nature of governance in Indian villages, and how existing governance structures, including those of clientelism, are built on the sustained political exclusion of women. It accounts for an entire gender system that subordinates women – the patriarchal political order – highlighting the complexity of their political inclusion and the ways in which identity can shape power in democratic systems. It sheds light on the political worlds and networks in which women reside and illustrates how women’s most intimate network, the household, shapes their political behavior. It highlights the central role of violence and coercion in suppressing women’s political voices, but also demonstrates how (and when) policies can give women the tools to overcome this subordination. This book is also about development and the unconventional and unanticipated ways it is tied to women’s political representation in modern democracies. It examines cases of women, like Sushila, who have found their voice in politics, and unearths the process and instruments of their political empowerment.

In this endeavor, I analyze a variety of novel data sources, including surveys and interviews, and multiple methodologies, such as natural experiments and network analysis, to explore the experiences of women across villages in one state of India, Madhya Pradesh, that are in most ways indistinguishable but

Feigenberg, Field, and Pande (2010) document how regular microfinance group meetings can stimulate social capital among group members.