



FRIENDSHIPS, NETWORKS AND SOLIDARITY: WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUP MEMBERSHIPS

**PILOT STUDY
CENTRE FOR GENDER AND POLITICS**

A Peer-Reviewed Publication

Ishita Gupta, Srijita Chakrabarti, Sugandha Singh Parmar

October 2022

Friendships, Networks and Solidarity: Women's Political Participation through Self-Help Group Memberships (Pilot Study)

Ishita Gupta, Srijita Chakrabarti, Sugandha Singh Parmar

October 2022

Centre for Gender and Politics

Abstract

The introduction of the reservation policy for women in India's local governance gave us a fresh perspective to look at women's emancipation; now, there was an opportunity to observe, analyse and examine the intended political empowerment of women at the grassroots. Several years before this initiative, the Self Help Groups (SHG) were introduced in the late 1980s to empower women in rural areas by mobilising them as an organised collective, facilitating interactions and financial literacy. We observed that SHGs could potentially impact women's political attitudes positively. However, while the stated intent of SHGs is to foster and facilitate women's leadership, we could not determine from the literature in what ways SHGs have facilitated women's leadership in acting politically. Through this pilot study, we aimed to examine how mobilising through SHGs is strategically relevant to women in politics and governance. We interviewed 12 SHG women from 4 states in India who were members of the Gram Panchayat or have actively contested elections. We also interviewed stakeholders as our key informants. We observed that women leaders like Sarpanch, ward members, and political candidates, who were members of an SHG for over 5 years, had all received support from their group members in campaigning and decision-making. Women felt more confident working with the community and interacting with government officials and political parties. Other factors like support from family and, in some cases, political parties also played a role in women's initial steps towards becoming candidates for elections. We propose to expand this study to a pan-India research to widen the scope and areas of investigation.

Keywords— Political Empowerment, Women and Politics, Women and Governance, SHG, Reservation

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the participants' cooperation in attending virtual interviews during the Covid 19 pandemic. We are grateful for all the participants who shared their valuable perspectives that shaped our study.

On behalf of the entire team, I would like to express our gratitude to Bansari Kamdar for her mentorship in refining the research idea and guidance in conducting interviews and analysis. I would also like to thank our Technical Advisory Unit (TAU) members, Sakshi Hallan and Devanik Saha, for their inputs, who believed in the value of this work and the cause of gender equality in politics.

I am also immensely grateful to professionals (whose identity is kept anonymous) from Civil Society Organizations who helped us connect with respondents and became key informants for the study.

I would like to sincerely thank Urmy Shukla (Director - Monitoring, Evaluation Research, Trickle Up); Sushmita Mukherjee (Director - Gender and Adolescent Girls, Project Concern International India); Soledad Artiz Prillaman (Assistant Professor of Political Science, Stanford University); Poonam Kakoti Borah (Assistant Professor of Women's Studies, Gauhati University Sensitivity Reader, CGAP); Abdul Matin (Assistant Professor of International Relations, Jadavpur University) for providing critical inputs and feedback.

I thank the authors of this study for their dedication and resilience while working during the pandemic. I also thank Aparna Devasan for her contribution in conducting interviews with participants from Kerala in Malayalam and translating and transcribing them. The entire team of volunteers at CGAP deserve appreciation and acknowledgement for their constant support and contributions.

I thank Renjini Rajagopalan, Anjana V Nair, Sai Devi S, Anfiya TM, Rinta John, Deepthi TR, Nikhil Alphonse, Anagha Rajesh, Ancy Rose George and Abhiramy SM for their contributions to translating and transcribing the interviews conducted in Malayalam.

Akhil Neelam

Director

Centre for Gender and Politics

Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Introduction	4
Method	5
Limitations	7
Findings	7
Analysis	10
Power ‘within’: Developing individual’s political autonomy through collective agency	10
Breaking out of ‘Doxa’	10
Intra-Household Bargaining Power	11
Creating an Alternative Political Identity	12
Power ‘with’: Navigating the Panchayati system with collective action	12
The Politics of Space	13
Leveraging the SHG for Collective Action	13
Proxies and Parties	14
Friendships, Networks and Solidarity	15
Discussion and Conclusion	16
References	18
Annexure	19

Introduction

India stands 148th out of 188 in the world ranking for women in parliamentary positions, with a mere 14.4 percent of women in the Lok Sabha and 11.2 percent in the Rajya Sabha [IPU, 2021]. At the local governance level, however, the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 has provided a minimum of one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions ¹(PRIs). In most Indian states, this reservation has now been elevated to 50 per cent. With this, women constitute 45.6 per cent of total elected representatives in the PRIs, i.e. approximately 1.4 million Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) [Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020]. While the amendment brought visibility to women in terms of numbers, the extent of agency in decision-making that a woman in politics possesses is widely contested.

The spectrum of opinion on the impact of implementing reservations and quotas is largely divided. While supporters of affirmative action, a prominent figure being Devaki Jain, have argued that representation and strong women leadership will pave the way for more women-friendly governance. On the other hand, as noted in a Government report (as cited in [Sharma, 1998], critics of reservation call it an ‘illusion of equality and power’ that is used to resist other special measures to elevate women’s position in society (Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, [Government of India, 1974], p. 301). Numerous reports also indicate that women’s representation is controlled by their husbands, families and political parties.

Two decades before these reservations were implemented, a trade union for women in the informal sector had started spearheading women’s representation and economic empowerment through its power as a collective. Formed in 1972, Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), founded by Ela R. Bhatt, strived to increase the bargaining power of its members within and outside the household. This trade union’s success contributed to the idea of Self Help Groups (SHG).

An SHG is usually a group of 10-20 women from similar socio-economic backgrounds who live close to each other. It started as a savings group for women without access to the formal banking system to meet regularly and save small amounts of money together. The idea was for the women to leverage their collective power to access microcredit, skills training and sometimes even start a small enterprise. The Government of India promotes over 77.3 lakh SHGs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), having over 8.4 crore women across all states and Union Territories in India [Ministry of Rural Development, 2022]. These groups are increasingly being leveraged by NGOs and the government to promote women’s empowerment, create livelihood opportunities, impart health information and ultimately strengthen women’s roles in communities.

The power of collective action to strengthen women’s agency in politics has been studied widely. In 2016, a randomised control trial was initiated in Madhya Pradesh to test the hypothesis that- women’s access to economic networks directly translated to women’s political participation [Prillaman, 2017]. Two neighbouring villages were picked with similar demographics, one had women mobilised into SHGs, and in the other, the women remained disconnected. The study in the control village (without SHGs) showed women’s political participation as extremely poor. They were uninformed about their rights and saw politics as a man’s job. They rarely ran for elections except when the seats were reserved. Even then, they just acted as proxies for their husbands. The treated village (with SHGs) had a drastically different reality. In the 2015 local representative elections, women won 22 of the 28 elected positions, much higher than the number of seats reserved for women. They had actively participated in the gram sabhas and had even submitted applications for government services in higher panchayats, with a 70 per cent success rate.

The study shows a clear shift in women’s political behaviour who had access to an SHG. Being part of a women’s group increased their social connections and gave them a network to discuss important issues. Additionally, an SHG intervention increased the savings and financial stability of the women, which in turn afforded them the resources to participate in politics.

While access to an active group network empowered the women to organise and participate politically, another study on SHG groups highlighted the increase in the ‘personal autonomy’ of an individual by being part of a collective. A study was conducted among rural tribal women in 80 villages of Dungarpur in Rajasthan. It

¹local governance at the village level

showed that over the two years of treatment, the women in the villages, who were part of the SEWA network and had become active SHG members, regularly partook in collective action on issues such as water and sanitation and engaged in community affairs. The study also highlighted an increase in their household decision-making power. However, the women in the control villages had much lower participation rates [Desai and Joshi, 2013].

Collective action can also help overcome the lack of representation, as seen in the experience of women's use of collective agency in post-war countries. A study on the political participation of Tamil women post-Sri Lanka's civil war (1983-2009) observed the formation of 'savings help groups' groups by women that also worked to garner support for women's political participation, economic empowerment, and psychosocial support in the post-war period. They were affiliated with Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) that provided them with the training and support to contest local elections. By lobbying together, they put pressure on political parties to accept more women candidates. They sought to redistribute power while challenging inequality, structural violence and gender norms through community-based participation [Koens and Gunawardana, 2020]. Similar experiences were also seen in countries like Rwanda [Berry, 2009] and Nepal [Berry and Rana, 2019].

Elin Bjarnegård talks about the 'homosocial capital' in politics that enables men to create a structure of political cooperation through sharing resources and information in both formal and informal settings [Bjarnegård, 2013]. This investment in homosocial capital translates to electoral successes and the promotion of political careers. Women, especially at the local Panchayat level, are excluded from these networks built on the foundation of patriarchy. Women are instead dependent on men for resources, information and support. Often these informal networks tend to gather after hours that automatically become inaccessible to women, given their household responsibilities and the stigma attached to women's interaction with men beyond their immediate family. This leads to women self-excluding themselves from such networking opportunities to protect their reputations. In this skewed scenario, forming alternative channels or capitalising on existing networks like an SHG and utilising their inbuilt structure may act as a counter to traditional men's networks.

Collective action, especially for women, is a means to withstand societal and household pressure. It helps cultivate one's agency to challenge the restrictions put on their lives both in the public and the private sphere. It creates opportunities and spaces for expression that is difficult to carve by an individual alone. In the Indian context, SHGs are the most prevalent structures for women to gather collectively. While there are studies that have shown the impact that collective action through SHGs on women's political participation, we found very few studies that have examined the impact of the SHGs in enabling women leaders to perform politically and participate in governance. Our study attempts to gauge the role played by SHGs in the lives of women candidates and representatives in local Panchayat elections.

Method

The research design involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews that took between 40 to 50 minutes and were conducted telephonically. They were conducted in the participants' local languages and recorded and translated into English. We interviewed women political leaders and candidates from 4 states, namely Kerala, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Jharkhand and Gujarat, over the last two years (2020-2022). Listening to and recording women's experiences in their social and political spectrum helped expose their aspirations, talents, motivations, insecurities, and obstacles faced in their journey to join politics and as politicians. The study attempts to map each woman's journey from becoming a part of an SHG to contesting local elections and their role in it after that. Additionally, five key stakeholder interviews with respondents working with SHG women as part of an NGO or with the government under the National Rural Livelihood Mission were conducted.

About the Sample: Who are these women?

The women we interviewed primarily live and grew up in rural India. They live in villages where Panchayats are the decentralised form of governance. The local governance system in India is divided into three levels, of which the lowest is the village level (Gram Panchayat), above that is the block level (Panchayat Samiti), and finally, the district level (Zilla Parishad). The members of Gram Panchayat (GP) are chosen through elections.

Designation	Number of Participants
Sarpanch	2
Deputy Sarpanch	1
Ward Member	8
Electoral Candidate	1
Total	12

There are approximately 10,000 inhabitants in each GP, spread over 5 to 15 villages. As per respective State Panchayat Acts, Head, Deputy Head and members of Gram Panchayats are elected.

In Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Gujarat, members of the Gram Panchayat are directly elected. Except in Kerala, Pradhan or Sarpanch (Head of Gram Panchayat) is also directly elected by the voters. In Kerala, members of the Gram Panchayat elect their head. In all cases, Deputy Head or Upa-Pradhan is indirectly elected by members.

Candidates must live in the communities they represent and are typically nominated by political parties. The Gram Panchayat uses a majority vote to make decisions. The Pradhan does not have veto power.

Out of the 12 women we interviewed, 11 stood from reserved seats, and 10 belonged to Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. In total, we interviewed 3 women from Kerala, 2 from MP, 4 from Gujarat and 3 from Jharkhand. All the women we interviewed were married.

The two participants from MP held positions as the Sarpanch. One participant from Jharkhand was a Deputy Sarpanch, and one used to be a Sarpanch and is currently a ward member. Six participants from Kerala, Jharkhand and Gujarat are ward members, and part of different committees, one is a former Sarpanch who had competed in elections this term (2021) but lost, and one participant has actively run for the position of Sarpanch twice.

State	Number of Participants
Madhya Pradesh	2
Kerala	3
Jharkhand	3
Gujarat	4
Total	12

All women were members of an SHG. Of the 12 members, 7 of the participants held some position of responsibility in the SHG as Adhyaksh or Pramukh (leader) or khata lekhak (treasurer). Four others were active members and one participant from Kerala had recently joined the SHG.

Getting in touch

We reached out to Civil Society Organisations working with SHG women via social media and professional contacts to gain leads on women politicians who were members of an SHG. The 4 states were picked based on the CSOs we heard back from. Initially, the plan was to conduct in-person interviews. However, we resorted to telephonic surveys due to restrictions during the pandemic.

It is worth noting that our participants were all linked to a Civil Society organisation (CSO) actively working with them. Compared to other SHG women in general and or even SHG women from neighbouring villages without a CSO presence, the participants we interviewed have more exposure and access to opportunities. This is because the CSO allows access to training and other opportunities and gives a sense of legitimacy to the SHG by having it within its ambit.

Survey Instruments

The interview questionnaire for participants had open-ended questions and followed three key sections in addition to introductory questions. The first section traced the participants' journey from being SHG members to contesting elections. The following section focused on aspirations, participation during elections and awareness of civic issues. In addition, we asked them questions regarding their decision-making and influence while being a part of SHG. The last section focused on participants' views on SHG membership and whether it created opportunities for political participation.

The Key informant questionnaire was structured and had open-ended questions with six sections. The first section consists of introductory questions to understand their and their organisations' work with SHGs. The second section revolved around the engagement of key informants with SHG women who stood for elections. The third and fourth sections looked at how these women's leadership and financial skills have developed and how the organisations working with these women have facilitated that. The last two sections were designed to understand the links between SHGs and political empowerment and the opportunities to strengthen this link.

Limitations

Due to the threat of Covid infection, all the interviews were done telephonically. This means the surveyors were not physically present with the participant to observe their behaviour, reactions and surroundings.

In the case of in-depth interviews with participants who are representatives of a party or a community, it is natural for a participant to try to control the narrative and speak according to what they think we want to hear instead of the actual circumstances.

The sample for the pilot study is extremely small to be able to draw patterns and correlations. Additionally, sampling was done through convenience, therefore the economic and social status of the women might differ from region to region. Hence, we seek to expand this study to the national level and reach a larger number of participants.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the participants' responses under various themes identified as mentioned above in the method.

Motivation to join politics

The participants' responses indicated that there were different reasons to join politics, ranging from serving the community to encouragement from peers and families and influence by political parties.

Seven participants attributed their motivation to join politics to solving community issues. While some participants wanted to bring women's issues to the forefront, others were disappointed with the local governance and wished to take up the responsibility to solve the problem themselves. One participant from MP said that: *"Whenever we went to the panchayat with some problem, we never received any sulvayi (resolution), we then took it to the Janpad (block level); even there the issues did not get resolved. We were never invited to Gram Sabha; ladies were not invited at all. These were some significant challenges that I had to face. There was no vikaas (development) in the village. Hence everyone in the samooch (SHG), especially the didis (referring to the NGO workers who trained them), encouraged me to stand for the post of Sarpanch."*

Two participants indicated that while they were not looking to contest, they were approached by political parties and in one case, the family members convinced her to contest. The respondent, who is from Kerala stated that *"... the party asked my husband to make me contest the election. He was disinterested initially, but we cannot defy the party. So the party asked him and his brother. That's how I was placed as a candidate. I was disinterested initially because I was involved only in household chores before this. But then, I got the support of my husband. And family's full support. So, my husband is there with me for everything and encourages me;*

that's how I do things. Now I am also active and do things as far as I can myself." This participant was also the one who joined the SHG after joining politics.

One participant whose family was not supportive of her decision to join politics viewed it as an economic opportunity to be a financially contributing member of the family. This motivated her to fight against family pressure and contest and create an identity for herself, not just in the political sense but also as a financially independent woman.

Three out of twelve participants revealed that although they were not keen on joining politics initially, the encouragement from peers in the SHG group motivated them to contest elections. One participant from MP said she attended a state-level meeting where she heard a speech on women's political participation. That inspired her to fight elections, besides the support from family and peers.

Household support in joining politics

Out of the twelve participants, seven said their families supported their decision to contest elections. One participant said that during the campaigning, it becomes difficult for them to manage both household chores and the campaigning responsibilities but their mothers-in-law, husband and other family members came forward to take care of the domestic work to ensure the participants focussed properly on the elections. While another participant mentioned that her husband was supportive, but her mother-in-law and sister-in-law were not. Lastly, two participants said that they had to go against their families to contest the elections, they were discouraged from going to work by their families and society at large. They said their family expressed scepticism about their capabilities to become an elective representative.

One of the participants from Gujarat said that her husband would come along during her initial working days as the village people would gossip about seeing a young woman out alone. Another participant from MP mentioned that her husband would drop her at the panchayat office for meetings and then come pick her up after. A participant from Kerala said, *"I was disinterested initially because I was involved only in household chores before this. Then, I got the full support of my husband as well as family's full support. My husband was there with me for everything and encouraged me. Now I try to do things as far as I can myself"*.

Support from SHG while contesting elections

Nine out of twelve participants reported receiving help from their fellow SHG members while campaigning. The SHG women had accompanied the participant door to door, helped distribute pamphlets and gathered support. Only one participant from Kerala said that more than the SHG, her party had supported during her campaigning, but the *Kudumbashree* (SHG) support was also there.

The participants felt a sense of solidarity with their fellow SHG members in their support one participant explained that the women in the SHG extend their support with the hope that their needs would be represented and addressed in the Panchayat. She said that, *"Being related to Kudumbashree [term for SHG in Kerala] definitely helped in winning, as those belonging to Kudumbashree must have felt that the one who works for their upliftment, along with them, will be reachable anytime. Mostly it was the women who really wanted me to have a second term, and the party accepted that. The workers from the Employment Guarantee Scheme and Kudumbashree accompanied me during the canvassing."*

Another participant from Gujarat in her early 70s, currently a ward member, has been part of the SHG for the last two decades. She said that her work in the village is well-established, and is confident of getting elected as the Sarpanch in the next elections via *Samras*² (unanimously).

A participant from MP expressed her gratitude towards her fellow SHG members and mentioned that they had taken turns doing *chowkidari* (keeping watch) on the transport of alcohol to the village, which could instigate disturbance or even pre/post-poll violence. She added that the members would set off to campaign on her behalf by gathering support in the community in addition to campaigns where she was directly involved.

²a method of direct elections where a unanimous vote is taken and the Sarpanch is declared

Influence of political party

The influence of political parties was not consistent across participants from different states. All the Kerala participants said they were associated with one political party or the other. In Jharkhand, MP and Gujarat, all but one participant denied being linked to a party. Only one of 4 participants from Gujarat said that they had joined the women's wing of the party and received grants for the women. All other participants strongly denied and one participant even said they consciously tried to distance themselves from a political party, she explained it as *"we have never associated ourselves with the symbol of any particular political party; if we do, it will create differences in the group"*. They believed that associating with a party would cause a rift in the federation (collection of SHGs in a specific geographical area); hence, as a rule, people were supposed to remove political linkages before joining the federation. On the other hand, in Kerala, all the participants are active members of a political party, receive support from them and were inducted and chosen to run by the party.

Political parties approached the women either to fill reserved seats or due to the popularity of the participant. One participant from Kerala explained why she was approached, *"They approached me directly to contest in the election. Initially, I was reluctant, but then the party convinced me, saying that I have had experience as an ASHA (health worker) and have friendly relations with the people. If I contest, I will certainly win. They also looked at our attitude towards the common people, so they chose me. After all this, I agreed to contest."*

Influence on decisions taken in the Panchayat

All participants were punctual in attending Panchayat meetings regularly. On being asked if the meeting timings were convenient for them, one participant, who is a Sarpanch said that she decided the timing and date herself, while another said that the date of the meeting is pre discussed and is scheduled with group consensus. No one reported missing meetings or being unable to attend due to domestic engagements. The participants mentioned that they also encouraged other women from the SHG to attend these meetings with them. Two participants from Kerala mentioned that during the pandemic, meetings were held online, and they would join in through Zoom. One participant from Jharkhand mentioned that *"being a part of the meeting is essential because I have to come back and explain everything to the other SHG women in detail and ensure that they are aware"*.

Another participant who contested elections but did not win said she regularly attends Panchayat meetings to raise issues that have been discussed in among the SHG women in the federation. She also said, *"The meetings majorly focus on discussing government schemes and the work that needs to be done under them. We all [SHG members] participate equally and are given a chance to speak"*.

Work done for the village

All 12 participants were involved in the development of the village in some capacity. Even the participant who was not an elected member had actively worked to raise women's issues. The major issues that the participants highlighted were mostly under the themes of health and sanitation, water, domestic violence, widow pension, school management and education, and mid-day meals. As a ward member, one participant was involved in managing the funding of the projects and maintaining *hisaab* (accounts) of the infrastructural work done in the village.

During the pandemic, the participants were active in supplying rations to the community and making arrangements for the poor and elderly. In Kerala, they also contributed to raising funds and providing relief during floods.

Two participants were in the School Management Committee and regularly inspected food quality and nutrition given to the children. Women in the *Paani Samiti* (Village Water and Sanitation Committee) in Gujarat and Kerala have also worked on bringing water to the village and addressing the water shortages. Five of the participants recounted incidents where they had worked with other SHG members to rescue women in the village from domestic violence and filed cases against the abusive husband. They had also worked together towards banning alcohol sales in the village.

Political aspirations

Majority of the participants, when asked about their political aspirations, expressed keen interest and passion for becoming change-makers and working towards the development of their village.

Two participants were uncertain about moving up in politics; however, they expressed interest in becoming part of block and district-level politics if given a chance. A participant mentioned that she did have an aspiration to grow in politics but also acknowledged that people and party support are essential. One newly elected participant said it was too early to discuss political aspirations.

Awareness of government schemes and policies

All participants showed awareness of civic and social issues and government schemes. Most of the participants had received some training from the local NGO or as part of a government training program.

One participant mentioned that, for her, the primary source of information on government schemes and policies was the SHG federation, she mentioned that, *“The Federation provides us with major information; it helps us in the creation and procurement of documents that are required to be a part of all the schemes and policies, for example, the widow pension. The required documents are provided to the tahsildar (revenue officer) and the Federation also helps us in following up with the required authorities to know about the formalities, processes and deadlines. With the cooperation of the Federation, we help the women in the entire process of availing the scheme”*.

One participant said she held regular meetings at the block level on availing government schemes and the next steps. While one participant said that she was newly elected and therefore tried to work with the information available to her, which she admitted was limited.

Analysis

In this study, we look at political participation by whether a respondent has contested the local village-level election or/and holds a position at the village panchayat as a Sarpanch or a ward member. To hold a position in politics, there are various dimensions of agency that a candidate must have. It requires access, control, and power over resources and their surroundings. For this study, a few specific dimensions of agency that were common across our participants have been explored. It must be noted that political participation also heavily depends on socioeconomic determinants like education, income and class. Nevertheless, the fact remains that women, in general, are less likely to participate in politics.

The analysis is broadly divided into two aspects of the concept of Power - ‘power within’ and ‘power with’. ‘Power within’ or one’s psychological and individual agency is seen through the participant’s intra-household bargaining power, mobility to go out in society or ability to form their own political identity. The concept of ‘power with’ or agency as a group was seen through factors like decision-making power in the Panchayat and community at large, navigating public spaces and collective action.

However, it should be noted that the indicators cannot be standardised for all participants due to the small sample size and variability in geography, demography, cultural, economic and socio-political circumstances.

Power ‘within’: Developing individual’s political autonomy through collective agency

Breaking out of ‘Doxa’

In a rural Indian household, the social order is such that the gender roles are structurally ingrained. Duties and responsibilities are allotted according to gender. The domestic and caregiving responsibilities are the woman’s domain and everything beyond is the man’s. In a survey of 42000 households in India [Vanneman., 2018], almost 80 per cent of women said they had to seek permission from a family member to visit a healthcare

centre and 70 per cent said that their parents or relatives alone chose their husband. On the other hand, 92 per cent of the women reported having decision-making power over what will be cooked that day. The traditional rural household is organised around a setup that irrefutably naturalises patriarchal practices and traditions.

This reality can be explained through Bourdieu's idea of 'doxa'. Bourdieu uses the term doxa to define the unquestioned truths in society that are taken for granted and, as a result, naturalised as traditions. As long as the conscience of the social actors is constrained by the possibilities available to them, "the natural and social world appears as self-evident" [Bourdieu, 1977]. The social actors restrain themselves to their dictated social positions. The shift from doxa to discourse is only possible when alternative ways of 'being and doing' present themselves to the social actors and they start questioning the naturalised order. The power to 'at least imagine the possibility of having chosen differently' is important to develop a critical perspective [Kabeer, 1999a].

In the interviews with our participants, when the women were asked what their lives were like before the SHG was formed, they said that the mobility they have now was beyond their imagination. Before, they had no information about what was happening in the village and did not even step out of their house except to go to the field for agricultural labour. One participant explained that after the SHG was formed, their interaction with the 'outside' world increased, *"We could leave our home. Our horizons expanded. We now sit with the women of other villages. We can go out and interact more, and I do not think I would have been in this position without the help of the samooth (SHG)"*.

For many of these women, the SHG acts as a platform to express their grievances, find solidarity in their domestic struggles and acts as a window into the outside world beyond their households. Through skill development, training programmes or entrepreneurship opportunities that the SHG receives through the government or by being linked to an NGO, they are further mobilised into venturing beyond their domestic duties.

10 out of the 12 participants revealed that initially before the SHG was formed, they had no civic life. They mainly stepped out of the house to attend to the field or the animals. Only after they joined the SHG, they had someplace to go. Most had been a member of the SHG for at least 5 years before stepping into politics. They were able to break out of Doxa by joining the SHG. Hence, their families were reasonably prepared when it came to joining politics.

Access to women's networks such as SHGs can provide a channel to break out of the state of doxa and begin to redefine gender roles.

Intra-Household Bargaining Power

The politics of intra-household decision-making in the private sphere of a house is crucial in determining how subjects perform in public. Therefore, 'the project of women's empowerment is dependent on collective solidarity in the public arena as well as individual assertiveness in private' [Kabeer, 1999b]. The intra-household bargaining power of our participants was observed in their navigation of agency in both private and public spheres.

While most participants said that their families encouraged them to join politics, one participant from MP said that her mother-in-law and sister-in-law discouraged her at first, as she had domestic chores at home and also because they did not want her to get into trouble with politics.

The participant, who is now a Sarpanch, said, *"I confronted them, saying that as I am a little educated, if I do not come for people's help, then what is the point of my education? I will handle the household chores and, at the same time, work for society"*.

In a recent study exploring the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, it was observed that co-residence with the mother-in-law had a negative correlation with her daughter-in-law's mobility and ability to form social connections outside the house. Access to peers outside enabled the daughter-in-law to overcome mobility constraints [Anukriti et al., 2020].

For the participant, being part of an SHG and having a certain level of education enabled her to develop the confidence to approach her family and talk about taking part in politics. She also revealed that her husband

helped her fill out the form for her candidature. The resistance she faced, as mentioned above, was from the women in her household. She needed to ensure that she fulfils her domestic responsibilities as a caregiver to earn her way out. On the one hand, her mobility and access increased, but on the other, her predetermined domestic gender roles did not change.

One participant from Gujarat, a ward member in her seventies, mentioned that in her initial days of campaigning and going around the village, her husband accompanied her to support against ‘village gossip’. Another participant from Kerala stated that her husband helped fill out her candidature forms. They viewed their husband as a support system in their political journey.

Being part of a collective group gives the participant a power from within’ which is the intrinsic value of collective action which is beyond our observations [Kabeer, 1999c]. Whether or not group action has quantifiable developmental effects, it is crucial to boost women’s self-confidence and gain access to networks and spaces outside their immediate families. Women can resist gender stereotypes in the larger community, either collectively or individually, by first discovering their own power.

Creating an Alternative Political Identity

A rural household is generally considered a single unit in terms of their political disposition. The patriarchal social structure dictates that men naturally assume the role of the political representative of the household. This arrangement was termed ‘family-centred clientelism’, where the political systems primarily cater to the man’s preference [Prillaman, 2021a]. This results in two major outcomes; one, only the men develop relevant political skills and information, and secondly, politics is organised around men’s interests. In this equilibrium, the women’s political preferences are either not recognised or prioritised; they are considered subordinates in the household [Prillaman, 2021b].

However, when women become a part of a social group with other women, they have a chance to participate in an alternative identity group to coordinate with politically. The social group provides better access to information and collective agency for women to act unanimously [Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994].

When women become a part of an SHG, they are exposed to discussion and opinions beyond the beliefs held in their household. The political stance in the SHG group may remain the same, but it is detached from the members’ individual households. The SHG members now have two political identities, one as household representatives and one as SHG members.

An instance of developing an alternative political identity beyond their household can be seen when political parties approach a woman to join their party directly. Their presence is no longer considered within the unit of her household, but as an eligible candidate by virtue of her public life and community participation. This was seen especially in the instance of our study participants from Kerala. On being asked if the party approached them directly, one participant recounted that:

“ Yes. They came to see me and asked whether I could stand for elections. I was very nervous. The party was looking for candidates based on their character and personal characteristics. When I said that no one here knows me, they said it is not a big issue, as we go out and talk with people, it will be settled... At first, I felt shy while going to houses and asking for votes, but later I changed. I had good support from my husband, and I also felt motivated to work to protect our people as our area is a coastal one and is highly prone to cyclones.”

In this case, as the participant explained, the party came to her based on her prior work in the village. She was not approached via her husband or because her household was politically active and subscribed to the party ideology. The party’s motivation to recruit the participant might have been to find a candidate to fill the reserved seat. Nevertheless, they were familiar with her because of her social presence as part of the SHG.

Power ‘with’: Navigating the Panchayati system with collective action

The Politics of Space

“As women in patriarchal societies, we are familiar with limitations, constraints, and small, confined spaces. We live in confined spaces—both physical ones—the *char divari* (four walls)—and ideological ones—appropriate jobs, notions of family honour, chastity” - [Rao, 1990]

Public and political spaces are traditionally domains of ‘masculinity’ and are built to culturally marginalise women’s voices to the private sphere of home and family [Peterson and Tickner, 1992]. The low rate of women’s labour force participation in the economy in India, especially in the public sphere, is a cause for women’s unequal access to public spaces. Research by feminist geographers has highlighted the aspect of ‘*gendered spacialisation of fear*’ that control women with the threat of being judged by society or the threat of violence [Koskela, 1997], [Mcdowell, 1997], [Bhattacharyya, 2015], [Dulhunty, 2020]. This fear can be external in cases like women being denied entry into certain places, work meetings being scheduled after hours etc, or it can be internal when the woman herself internalises the ‘norms of social legitimacy and ideal femininity’, that makes her conscious about her own body and sexuality [Paul, 2011].

Key informants working on the ground with the government, as well as NGOs, all agreed on the fact that despite there being fifty per cent reservation for women in the PRI, it hardly sees any female participation. These spaces are, by default, unwelcoming to women. Meetings are held at odd hours, men and women sit segregated, and the crowd is always overwhelmingly male. Even if women brave these odds, they are made to feel excluded and not solicited in discussions. Under such circumstances, the women’s families also do not permit them to participate, as mixing with the opposite sex is seen as a deterrent to the woman’s reputation.

While speaking of the hurdles faced while entering politics, one respondent spoke of the community’s response to her candidature: *“People questioned my character again and again. According to them, I was not a good woman, and they were extremely discouraging. I believe this was some kind of a political conspiracy against me to damage my image, but I never succumbed to any of this negativity. Even after joining politics, people said that I would not be able to handle the responsibilities, and they made many plans to create difficult situations for me.”*

Under the umbrella of a women’s SHG, women may find support in just being present for each other in such male-dominated meetings. Having a group to back up their claims gives them agency and influence in decision-making. For example, a few of our participants mentioned that other SHG women would also attend Panchayat meetings when the participant was presiding, or they had an agenda to address.

We asked all the participants if they regularly attended meetings, to which all responded in the affirmative. A participant from Gujarat, a newly elected ward member, said she was informed about the meeting time and the agenda before it took place. While another participant, who was the Sarpanch, said that she herself called the meetings. Having control over the timing of meetings shows the presence of power and authority over her constituents.

When asked how she made herself heard in the Panchayat, one participant from Gujarat said, *“I would just pull the chair to the centre of the room and sit on it. They could not say anything to me. They know I am working for the people. One just needs to have ‘aatma vishwas’ (self-confidence)”*.

As observed, having the backing and support of other SHG members and having an equal representation of genders in a public space encourages women to speak up.

Leveraging the SHG for Collective Action

An SHG or any act of collective action works on the principles of ‘cooperative infrastructure’, where each member is bound by a promise held by shared incentives and a common social context [Mansuri and Rao, 2013]. In this structure, group-based mobilisation allows for the basis of political coordination. Additionally, there is also pressure to conform to group norms. The mobilisation model of political participation dictates that an individual’s environment determines their political participation based on available opportunities. A person’s participation increases when their opinion is solicited. Also, conversely, participation helps develop po-

litical attitudes [Alford and Scoble, 1968], [Knoke, 1990], [Olsen, 1972], [Rogers et al., 1975], [Pollock, 1982], [Leighley and Nagler, 1984].

An instance of collective action was demonstrated by our participants when three of them (two ward members and one electoral candidate) from Gujarat, who belonged to the same federation, came together along with many others and submitted a *Patrika* (letter) to the District Collector. The letter says that ‘any woman coming to power must perform her responsibilities herself and not be a proxy for their husband or other men in their families.’ The respondent said that the letter was received with a lot of praise by the Collector, and they had promised to forward it to the higher authorities.

While ‘power within’ talks about an individual’s internal psychological aspect, the idea of ‘power with’ is derived from strong social relationships built on trust. It is characterised by the ability to respond ‘collectively to events outside the group’ [Rowlands, 1997]. Successful instances of group action can deepen interpersonal ties and increase ‘power with’. One respondent, who is a Sarpanch in Madhya Pradesh mentioned how the SHG women had come together to confront a case of injustice in their village:

“We once helped a woman whose husband had married another woman, and she (the first wife) and her children did not have any source of food and care. All of us (SHG members) went to the police and filed a complaint. The husband threatened me. However, we did not deter. Finally, the decision was in favour of the woman. He had to give her money for the children.”

Other participants from Gujarat recounted similar stories of addressing domestic violence as a collective. One of them countered, “*What will he (the husband) do? He can threaten me, but he cannot do anything*”. she further mentioned that the SHG and the village were in her support.

Another widely witnessed collective civic action exhibited by SHGs was seen in their response to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. It was observed that women leaders at the Panchayat level proactively involved SHGs in stitching masks, manufacturing PPE kits and sanitisers and running community kitchens in responding to the needs of villagers and migrant labour moving back into the villages.

Proxies and Parties

Under clause 3, article 243D of the 73rd amendment of the Panchayati Raj system, 20 states, including the ones from where our participants belong- Gujarat, Jharkhand, Kerala and Madhya Pradesh have 50 per cent reservation for women in the Panchayat. Over the last 30 years, these states have increased it from 30 per cent provisioned initially in 1992. However, despite the attempt at inclusion, the ground reality of this arrangement is starkly different. A prevalent system of *Sarpanch Patis* or proxies exists, wherein the woman is the Sarpanch on paper, but in practice, it is their husband who is in power. Everyone in the village considers the husband to be the acting Sarpanch. For example, while looking for a potential participant in a reserved constituency in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, the people in the village named a man as their Sarpanch, who we later found out was the husband of the ‘elected’ Sarpanch.

When asked about such proxy arrangements and what they thought of them, most participants were aware and called it extremely common. One participant described the reality as follows:

“The major problem here is they want to bring women to politics but want them to be there and not take an active part. They want women just to be there as a name. But we are from a federation (SHG collective). We are aware and knowledgeable; hence our experience is high. Because of this, they [referring to the political parties] do not want us to go and join. We are responsible women, knowing what must be done and how. This is what we have to face.”

In a study on women’s leadership, when given a choice between two hypothetical male and female leaders with identical performance, villagers who had never been exposed to female leadership preferred a male representative [Beaman et al., 2009]. However, it was also observed that exposure to women representatives helped weaken the bias. The experiment results indicated that villagers rated her as less effective than men in the election cycle when there was a woman candidate for the first time. However, in the next round of elections,

the effectiveness rating they gave increased when the villagers had already experienced a tenure under female leadership. While, on the one hand, exposure to female representatives helps reduce bias against them, it also contributes to motivating other women to consider contesting.

One participant from Kerala who was re-elected as the Sarpanch for a second term said, *“The support from the people was gratifying. I contested for the second term because of the requests from the villagers.”*

One of our participants from Gujarat, elected as the Sarpanch last year (December 2021), talked about her previous campaigning experience as a ward member and touched upon having experienced discrimination. She said they had all the votes and support, but on the last day of campaigning, the opposition party distributed cash to the voters and turned the whole thing around. She was contesting from a reserved constituency, and the other contestant was a woman who was a proxy for her husband. When asked if such wives had any involvement in the Panchayat, she said, *“No, they do not. They just stay at home. But work is done by us [referring to herself and other women from the federation]. Those who won, their husbands work and they are not involved. There is no point of her being the Sarpanch.”*

On the other hand, due to seats being reserved for women in the Panchayat, parties often look for women candidates to fill these seats. In such circumstances, it becomes strategically advantageous for them to seek out potential women candidates. An example of a situation where the party approached the participant was seen in the case of a participant from Kerala, who is now a Sarpanch. She said that initially, she was reluctant to join politics; however, their constituency was reserved, and the party needed a contestant, so they approached her husband and her brother for her candidature. Her husband was also reluctant, but he could not refuse the party. That is how she came into politics. However, she is now an active EWR, has worked on resolving various village issues like drinking water scarcity, and worked with her fellow SHG members to provide food for the flood victims in Kerala (2021).

Being elected as the representative is the first step; however, having decision-making power is the primary determinant of political agency. In the cases that we saw, those participants who came into power due to pressure from a party or to fill a reserved seat, being part of an SHG gave them the agency to participate in decision-making and not remain a proxy for their husband or party. While a candidate representing a party or even her household is constrained by their motivations and beliefs, if the participant is physically present and is the person giving instructions and presiding meetings, we consider it as having political agency.

Friendships, Networks and Solidarity

One finding from the above-mentioned study in Madhya Pradesh [Prillaman, 2021c] on women’s increased political participation due to SHGs, was that ‘women in treated villages reported significantly more friends, specifically female friends, more people they discuss important matters with, and more people they visit in their free time’. The space for repeated interaction can facilitate collective action over shared interests like gender-based violence, health and sanitation or access to public goods and services. Therefore, being part of a network fosters solidarity which can be leveraged against traditional male networks in politics.

In our study, eight out of twelve participants mentioned a female figure in their lives who inspired them to join politics. These role models were mostly other SHG members standing for elections and entering office. One participant from Gujarat said she was inspired by a fellow senior SHG member from her neighbouring village, who had won elections multiple times and was doing great work. She described her as:

“She is extremely independent, educated and straightforward in her approach. When I spoke to her, I realised that I would also like to be like her and use the position in the best way possible but the problem is that we do not get the seats and do not get the opportunity to serve the people. She was powerful and won every single time while working diligently for the people”.

Another participant mentioned that, as part of a training program for their SHG, they were taken to an event where she heard other women who were part of the Panchayat speak about what they had done and what women in politics could achieve. This, in turn, inspired her to do something for her village. While another

said, “The former panchayat member was my friend, and I accompanied her during her election campaign, and that is how I entered politics”.

Additionally, some of our participants have also acted as an inspiration to other SHG members. One participant from Jharkhand, who received political training from a local NGO, said she participated in workshops and imparted her knowledge to other women in the village:

“...I focussed on all the areas under my Panchayat and advised other women working in panchayats. Since I ran for elections the second time, I felt it was my duty to share my experience and knowledge with those standing for the first time. I keep on advising and sharing my knowledge with the other women.”

In Jharkhand and Gujarat, where two of our participants belonged to the same federation, they praised their counterparts and mentioned that they had learnt from and worked with each other while joining politics.

A common thread between all of the participants we interviewed was that they were all associated with an NGO that supported the SHG through training, information sessions and guidance. All their areas had the NGO working for an extended period, facilitating the formation and functioning of the SHG. The NGOs had heavily invested in the capacity building of the women. The NGOs’ continued presence also contributed to reducing the community’s bias against women leaders.

Instances from our participant interviews and media reports affirm that women standing for politics and breaking into the male domain of politics invites extreme scrutiny and judgement from their surroundings. In such circumstances with innumerable obstacles, having a network of solidarity can be a crucial source of strength.

Discussion and Conclusion

This is a study to understand the trials, tribulations and motivation of EWRs in rural India who are also part of an active SHG. Our study investigates if SHGs can be leveraged to act as alternate social networks for women to participate politically. We do not seek to justify women’s participation in politics, but instead, look at how collective action can increase women’s bargaining power and make their demands more strategically relevant to politicians – both in terms of policy making and in considering women as ‘bankable’ candidates to contest elections. Additionally, SHGs can create the possibility for women to enter politics without the backing of men or as a proxy.

In our study, nine out of twelve participants mentioned having limited mobility before the SHG formation. Being part of an SHG and participating in meetings and training gave them the exposure and agency to become active in the community and eventually join politics. While most participants received support from their families, we did not observe any change in the share of domestic responsibilities. Alternatively, they were able to form a political identity outside of their household, as a member of the SHG. It should also be noted that the possibilities of negative effects of agency, like the correlation between increased political agency and domestic violence have not been explored, but are worth noting.

Responses of the participants reveal that in cases where the political party had identified and approached them to join politics, it was because of their role in the SHG as opposed to standing as a proxy. Participants were sympathetic but critical of the women who stood as proxies for their husbands. All the participants we surveyed were responsible for carrying out their duties in the Panchayat and were informed of the needs of their constituency.

Entering a historically gendered space such as the Panchayat entails crossing multiple barriers of judgement, scrutiny and antagonism. We find that the strength and backing of a network cushioned the participants against these adversities. They received support from their fellow SHG women during campaigning and decision-making within the Panchayat. The support from the SHG allowed the participants to gain power and political ground to be a part of the decision-making table and often lead the discussions.

Collective action was a major binding factor in the SHG. The elected women representatives involved the SHG

members in their village in various community activities. We saw a role model effect for political leadership being propagated among the members of the SHG. Participants mentioned being motivated as well as inspiring other fellow SHG members.

A common thread across participants was their involvement with a local NGO that provided the groundwork for activating the SHG and making it functional. The training and resources from the NGO inadvertently gave the participant the confidence and skills which helped them in campaigning and decision-making. However, it was also observed through interaction with participants and NGO professionals that the NGOs usually prefer to distance themselves from politics. The National Rural Livelihood Mission the government policy responsible for SHG formation also does not include political mobilisation of SHG women under its mandate. Our findings nevertheless reveal the positive impact of NGO/government training on increasing women's involvement in politics. This can be seen as a policy recommendation to promote training on governance for SHGs.

This pilot study provided the foundation for building further on the role of SHGs in women's political participation. The study gave birth to certain assumptions that have the scope of further research, like the role of NGOs and political parties in furthering women's political participation. There is also a dearth of literature raising the opportunity to explore the advantages and factors that attract women and their families into joining politics, like access to economic benefits, social capital or other resources. We plan to further our research in these directions and advance the study to a pan-India scale with a larger sample size to substantiate our observations during the pilot.

References

- [Alford and Scoble, 1968] Alford, R. and Scoble, H. (1968). Sources of local political involvement. *American Political Science Review*, 62(4):1192–1206.
- [Anukriti et al., 2020] Anukriti, S., Herrera-almanza, C., Pathak, P., and Karra, M. (2020). Curse of the mummy-ji : The influence of mothers-in-law on women in india. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 102(5):1328–1351.
- [Beaman et al., 2009] Beaman, L., Chattopadhyay, R., Duflo, E., Pande, R., and Topalova, P. (2009). Powerful women: Does exposure reduce bias? *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(4):1497–1540.
- [Berry, 2009] Berry, M. (2009). Barriers to women's progress after atrocity: Evidence from rwanda and bosnia-herzegovina. *Gender amp; Society*, 31(6):830–853.
- [Berry and Rana, 2019] Berry, M. and Rana, T. (2019). What prevents peace? women and peacebuilding in bosnia and nepal. *Peace amp; Change*, 44(3):321–349.
- [Bhattacharyya, 2015] Bhattacharyya, R. (2015). Understanding the spatialities of sexual assault against indian women in india. *Gender, Place amp; Culture*, 22(9):1340–1356.
- [Bjarnegård, 2013] Bjarnegård, E. (2013). Clientelist networks and homosocial capital. gender, informal institutions and political recruitment.
- [Bourdieu, 1977] Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pages 80–86. Routledge, Nice, Trans.
- [Desai and Joshi, 2013] Desai, R. and Joshi, S. (2013). Collective action and community development: Evidence from self-help groups in rural india. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 28(3):492–524.
- [Dulhunty, 2020] Dulhunty, A. (2020). Gendered isolation, idealised communities and the role of collective power in west bengal self-help groups. *Gender, Place amp; Culture*, 28(5):725–746.
- [Government of India, 1974] Government of India (1974). Report of the committee on the status of women in india.
- [IPU, 2021] IPU (2021). Women in parliament in 2021. *Inter- Parliamentary Union*, (2).
- [Kabeer, 1999a] Kabeer, N. (1999a). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3):435–464.

- [Kabeer, 1999b] Kabeer, N. (1999b). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3):435–464.
- [Kabeer, 1999c] Kabeer, N. (1999c). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3):435–464.
- [Knoke, 1990] Knoke, D. (1990). Networks of political action: Toward theory construction. *Social Forces*, 68(4):1041.
- [Koens and Gunawardana, 2020] Koens, C. and Gunawardana, S. (2020). A continuum of participation: rethinking tamil women's political participation and agency in post-war sri lanka. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 23(3):463–484.
- [Koskela, 1997] Koskela, H. (1997). 'bold walk and breakings': Women's spatial confidence versus fear of violence. *Gender, Place Culture*, 4(3):301–320.
- [Leighley and Nagler, 1984] Leighley, J. and Nagler, J. (1984). Individual and systemic influences on turnout: Who votes? 1984. *The Journal of Politics*, 54(3):718–740.
- [Mansuri and Rao, 2013] Mansuri, G. and Rao, V. (2013). Can participation be induced? some evidence from developing countries1. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 16(2):284–304.
- [Mcdowell, 1997] Mcdowell, L. (1997). Women/gender/feminisms: Doing feminist geography. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21(3):381–400.
- [Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2020] Ministry of Panchayati Raj (2020). Representation in Panchayats.
- [Ministry of Rural Development, 2022] Ministry of Rural Development (2022). Schemes for women through self help groups [press release].
- [Olsen, 1972] Olsen, J. (1972). Public policy-making and theories of organizational choice. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 7(A7):45–62.
- [Paul, 2011] Paul, T. (2011). Space, gender, and fear of crime: Some explorations from kolkata. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 15(3):411–435.
- [Peterson and Tickner, 1992] Peterson, V. and Tickner, J. (1992). Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security. *Political Science Quarterly*, 108(2):347.
- [Pollock, 1982] Pollock, P. (1982). Organizations and alienation: The mediation hypothesis revisited. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 23(2):143–155.
- [Prillaman, 2021a] Prillaman, S. (2021a). Strength in numbers: How women's groups close india's political gender gap. *American Journal of Political Science*.
- [Prillaman, 2021b] Prillaman, S. (2021b). Strength in numbers: How women's groups close india's political gender gap. *American Journal of Political Science*.
- [Prillaman, 2021c] Prillaman, S. (2021c). Strength in numbers: How women's groups close india's political gender gap. *American Journal of Political Science*.
- [Prillaman, 2017] Prillaman, S. A. (2017). Strength in numbers: How women's groups close india's political gender gap.
- [Rao, 1990] Rao, V. (1990). Thumri" as feminine voice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25(17):S31–S39.
- [Rogers et al., 1975] Rogers, D., Bultena, G., and Barb, K. (1975). Voluntary association membership and political participation: an exploration of the mobilization hypothesis. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 16(3):305–318.
- [Rowlands, 1997] Rowlands, J. (1997). Questioning empowerment: Working with women in honduras.
- [Sharma, 1998] Sharma, K. (1998). Revitalisation of panchayati raj. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 31(3):745–754.
- [Vanneman., 2018] Vanneman., S. D. . R., editor (2018). pages 2011–2012. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- [Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994] Yamagishi, T. and Yamagishi, M. (1994). Trust and commitment in the united states and japan. *Motivation and Emotion*, 18(2):129–166.

Annexure

Interview Protocol Form

- Date
- Time
- Interviewer
- Interviewee

Oral Consent

1. Interviewee identity shall remain confidential
2. Permission to record
3. Purpose of research
4. Estimate time for the interview

Interview Questionnaire for Participants

Introductory Questions

1. How many people are there in your family?
2. Are you married?
3. Do you have children? a. How old are they?
4. What caste do you belong to?
5. Did you receive support from your family in joining politics?
6. What kind of restrictions did you face at home in order to join politics?
7. Do you hold a position in the panchayat/gram sabha/Mandal? In what position of responsibility are you in the panchayat/gram sabha/ Mandal?
8. What are your job responsibilities as XYZ in the panchayat?
9. Since when are you in Power?
10. Did you stand from a reserved constituency?

Section I: Pre-election journey

1. Traceback to the beginning of how you decided to run for politics.
2. How was your experience of canvassing/networking during your candidacy? Did being a member of SHG help in any way? How?
3. Was this before or after you joined the Self-help group?
4. Has being in a Self-help group contributed to your political participation? How?
5. Did the self-help group help fund/sponsor your campaign?
6. Did the political parties approach you?
7. What are the processes you had to go through to join politics, as part of an SHG? [only if she talks about restriction from family or else improvise family to any other challenge she faced]
8. Did other SHG members help in convincing your family to let you participate?

Section II: Post-election journey; awareness; decision-making; aspirations

1. Are you associated with any local/national party?
2. How does the party support you? Do you get to interact with the party members and the organization?
3. What is your participation during elections?
4. What type of interaction do you have with the Panchayat?
5. Did you work with the Sarpanch/ward member or Gram Pradhan/ Samiti member?
6. Who are the people you have to work with
7. When are the panchayat meetings held?
8. Are you a part of all the meetings?

9. What has been the impact of your work?
10. Are you consulted in making policies, discussing village grievances?
11. Are you in charge of a committee/program/department?
12. Do you have political aspirations?
13. What have you done and what do you plan to do for the village?
14. What are the district/local level issues currently affecting your Panchayat?
15. During the covid crisis, did your SHG do anything for the village?
16. Do you know of any schemes for SHG women offered by the government? Eg. Under MGNREGA
17. Does your husband/son/other men in the family help with your role as [Insert position] in the panchayat?
18. Do people depend on you more in your family?

Section III: SHG membership and how it created opportunities for political participation

1. Are you still a part of the SHG?
2. What were Restrictions from society in the process of you joining SHG?
3. What is/was your position in the SHG?
4. Do all the women in the SHG vote during elections?
5. How have things changed after the formation of the SHG? (follow up if does not mention- in terms of awareness, social engagement, access to resources)
6. Does being part of the SHG bring any kind of financial stability?
7. Do you see more women participating in elections now?
8. Is there anything else that has changed after the formation of the Self help Group, that we might not have asked about?
9. What hurdles do you think a non-SHG woman may face in order to join politics compared to you?
10. Does being part of an SHG influence your decision-making?
11. Do any non-SHG members in your village hold any position in politics?
12. Would you have joined politics if you were not in an SHG?

Interview Questions for Stakeholders

- Telephonic interview questions:
- 20-30 mins per participant:
- Location of interviewee :

Introductory question

1. How many SHGs are you working with?
2. Could you list them?
3. In what capacity do you work with them?
4. Could you give us a brief explanation of the structure of SHG that you worked with?
5. Are there women in SHGs that you have worked with who also stood for local representative elections?
6. How many women SHG members under your organisation are political position holders?
7. In what position are they?

Experience with SHG women who stood for elections

1. Are their families supportive of their standing in the elections?
2. Are their husbands supportive?
3. Do these women freely exercise decision making or are their family/husband involved in their choices?

4. What kind of restrictions does the woman face at home in coming out to join an SHG? a. and then participate in politics?
5. What kind of resistance does an SHG woman face from the community to participate in elections?
6. Is the woman/family excluded from community engagement?
7. Are there cases of women standing as proxies for their husbands from a reserved constituency?
8. How are these women treated differently?
9. Are customs like the parda system prevalent?
10. Do they go out for meetings/events, or only the husbands go instead of them?
11. Is there a differentiation in seating arrangements in Panchayati spaces according to gender and caste?
12. Are meetings usually held in Upper Caste areas? (where Lower Caste women may be uncomfortable to enter)
13. Are the meeting times schedules appropriate/convenient for the women's participation?
14. Are the women regularly informed about when the meeting will be held?
15. What type of interaction does an elected woman have with the Panchayat?
16. Is she consulted in making policies, discussing village grievances
17. Is she in charge of a committee/program/department?
18. Are the women part of important standing committees or hold a senior position like a chairperson?
19. Are these women aware of the news and local community concerns?
20. Do these women only stand from reserved constituencies?
21. Does reservation help in their empowerment?
22. Does being part of an SHG help these women in political participation? How?
23. Does being a part of an SHG give them the opportunity to network?
24. How does your organisation help women become independent decision-makers?
25. Are the women representatives standing for elections part of/inducted into a local/national party?
26. How does the party support the woman candidate?
27. Do political parties approach SHG women? (For voting or for running for election)
28. Does the SHG woman approach the party?
29. Do they get to interact with the party members and the organisation?
30. What is their participation during elections?
31. Do all the SHG women exercise their voting rights?
32. Questions to gauge development of leadership, financial skills
33. Are SHG women at the CLF/BO or the VO level the ones who stood for election?
34. What kind of responsibilities do they take up or are incharge of?
35. Are SHG women given responsibilities like running ration shops?
36. Do the women talk about politics amongst each other?
37. What are their political concerns and opinions on the issue?

Questions about the work of your organisation

1. Did your organisation contribute to the women joining the SHG? How?
2. Do you help these women by funding and sponsoring their campaigns? Or do you know of any organisations/government departments/campaigns that support SHG women and encourage them to engage in political leadership in the panchayat too?
3. How does it benefit them?
4. Where else do they fund their campaigns?
5. Do you make these women aware of how to enter politics/do you give them any political education?
6. How do you make the SHG women aware of the government schemes available to them?
7. How often have you worked with SHG women who join or joined politics?
8. Tell us more about your experience...
9. What helped the most for these women?
10. Does your organisation provide them with a platform such as organising a rally, political event to

spread awareness about their work?

Questions to gauge link between SHG and political empowerment

1. Do the women you have worked with have political aspirations?
2. What have the women under your organisation done for the village/district?
3. Have the women under your organisation specifically made decisions/changes that benefit other women?
4. Does the SHG provide any funding for the election campaign?

Questions to understand the opportunities women get by being part of an SHG

1. What are the opportunities a woman may get by virtue of being part of an SHG in order to join politics?
2. Are there class/caste based discrimination within SHGs?
3. Do women from the lower caste areas/dalit wada actively participate in the SHG?
4. Do you anticipate positive change over time?



ABOUT US:

Centre for Gender and Politics (CGAP) is a think tank based in India that contributes to a high-quality scholarship on the intersection of gender, politics and South Asia. It will become a platform for researchers, policymakers and the public to engage in a positive discourse on furthering gender diversity in politics with contextual nuances of South Asia as a focus.

AUTHORS:

Ishita Gupta

Ishita is a Research Assistant at J-PAL South Asia and a Researcher at CGAP. She has previously worked in Monitoring & Evaluation in rural Gujarat under the Aga Khan Development Network, where she worked on skill development projects with SHG women.

Srijita Chakrabarti

Srijita is a Young Professional with Department of Planning and Convergence, Government of Odisha and a Researcher at CGAP. She has experience researching in the fields of environment, gender, public policy and livelihoods.

Sugandha Singh Parmar

Sugandha is the Co-founder and Director of CGAP. She comes with a background in gender, human rights law and policy. Her research focuses on gendered analysis of policy, law, human rights issues and health. She has worked with Katha India, Tata Trusts, Government of Andhra Pradesh and currently works at Meta.

PROJECT MANAGER:

Akhil Neelam

Akhil is the Co-founder and Director of Centre for Gender And Politics (CGAP). He is a public policy practitioner and a gender rights advocate, working towards making politics gender-equal. Previously, he worked with the state governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

DESIGN: Komal Gangar