

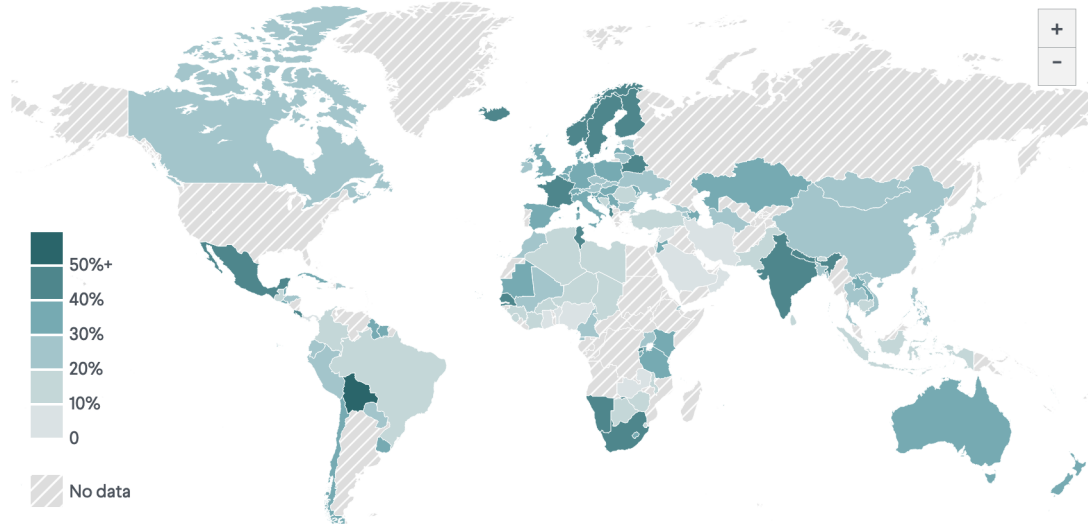
INCLUSIVE REFORMS AS LEVERS FOR  
SOCIAL EXCLUSION:  
THE PARADOXICAL CONSEQUENCES OF QUOTAS FOR  
WOMEN IN RURAL INDIA

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Instrumental Incoherence in Institutional Reform, SFI  
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# PARADOX: GENDERED POWER IN INDIA

- ▶ India is a global leader in quotas mandating women's political representation, yet one of the world's worst places for women.



**Figure.** % Elected local seats held by women (Vogelstein and Bro 2023).

# QUESTIONS

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2. Has women's inclusion via electoral gender quotas ("reservations") meaningfully ruptured gender hierarchies in the practice of politics?

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  - Facing increasing electoral competition, male political elites instrumentalized *gendered representation* to prevent other men from gaining power.
2. Reform design & implementation helped preserve gender hierarchy and constraints on elected women in: (a) the family, (b) village institutions, and (c) local bureaucracy.

## **PART I:**

Strategic, short-term electoral motives drove the reform, not an intention to make governance more inclusive.



# THE REFORM

**Reservations:** Constitutional mandate that all states “reserve” 1/3 of directly-elected seats in village-, block-, and district-level councils (*panchayats*) for women & 1/3 of elected chairpersons (*Sarpanch*) for women.

**Stated motive:** Rajiv Gandhi, speaking to the Parliament in 1989

*“There are 3 major reasons for which we believe this Constitutional innovation to be necessary. First, women constitute 1/2 the population and are involved in rather more than 1/2 the economic life of rural India... Second... Financial discipline and fiscal responsibility are ingrained in the habits and outlook of the women of rural India... Third, it is the women of India, in their role as grandmothers and mothers, who have been the repository of India’s ancient culture and traditions.”*

# STATE-LED VS. NATIONAL REFORMS

	Reservation Design			Constraints	
	Party	Year	Member quota	Head quota	Co-opt Women
Andhra Pradesh	TDP	1983-9	9-25%	9%	Yes
Karnataka	Janata Party	1985	25%	0%	Yes
Maharashtra	Shetkari Sanghatana	1986	100% [w/in all-women panels]	100% [w/in panels]	No
National	Congress	1993	33.33%	33.33%	No

*Note:* In Maharashtra, Shetkari Sanghatana encouraged grassroots-level changes.

# PATH TO CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

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	Commissions		Constitutional Amendments	
	Asoka Mehta	NPP	64th [failed]	73rd [passed]
Member quota	2 seats	50%/ all-wmn panels	30%	33.33%
Head quota	0%	30%	30%	33.33%
Time limit	None	No limit	Rotation	Rotation
Co-optation	Yes	No	No	No

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*Note:* Male élites were at the helm for all but the NPP-based reform designs.

# MECHANISMS OF CONTROL

1. **Co-optation:** if no women elected, men could “co-opt” the woman representative of their choice [typically with limited autonomy]
2. **Symbolic size:** numeric quotas set far below demographic numbers of women in general population [unlike caste quotas]
3. **Rotation:** enables quota time limit [typically 1 term]
4. **Discretion:** states determine “specific modalities” of reform, including the devolution of finances & responsibilities

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4. Opposition Janata Dal's victory & implementation of caste reservations (1989-90) magnify male upper caste elite sense of precarity
5. PV Narasimha Rao & Congress return to power & legislate women's reservations (74th Amendment), with limitations to ensure elite retention of (caste & gender) dominance

# POLITICAL STRATEGY DRIVING REFORM

**In Maharashtra**, according to Gopal Guru (1994, 2063-5):

*“The hidden meaning of the policy...seems to be related to the short-term goal of the ruling party & the long-term goal of the ruling class... the government has formulated this policy out of the need to enlist the support of women in the coming assembly elections... [and] has been very shrewd in using ‘mock liberalism’... to serve as an effective means of self-defence of the ruling class.”*

**Nationally**, according to Wendy Singer (2007, 124):

*“many women argued that this [reservation-based] political space was so artfully constructed by male politicians that it served to isolate women from the main power structures of political parties and legislative bodies and also created...a glass ceiling...that limited women’s participation.”*

## **PART II:**

Reform helped preserve gender hierarchy & political constraints on elected women across: (a) the family, (b) village institutions, and (c) local bureaucracy.

# THE EMPIRICAL REALITY 30 YEARS LATER: EVIDENCE FROM MAHARASHTRA

- ▶ Where?
  - Village councils in Maharashtra
- ▶ Why?
  - Important case: women's cross-caste mobilization & upper-caste men's domination
  - Natural experiment
- ▶ Surveys in 611 villages of:
  - President (sarpanch), Vice president (upa sarpanch), local bureaucrat (gram sevak)
  - Group discussion interaction
  - 6 representative citizens



# 1. CONSTRAINTS IN THE FAMILY

## WOMEN SARPANCHES' INFERIOR INTRA-FAMILY BARGAINING POSITION

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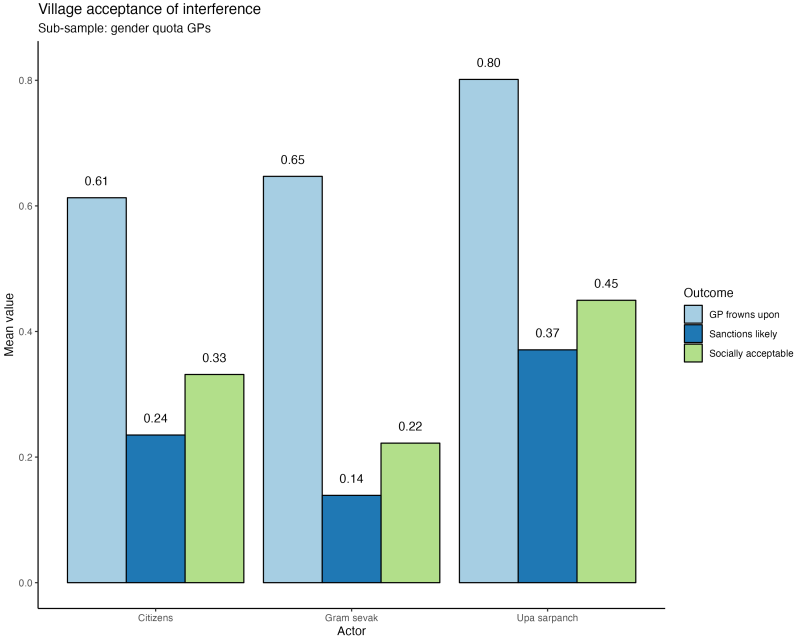
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- ▶ are significantly less likely to travel alone (30 pp,  $p < 0.001$ ) or know how to drive (52 pp,  $p < 0.001$ )



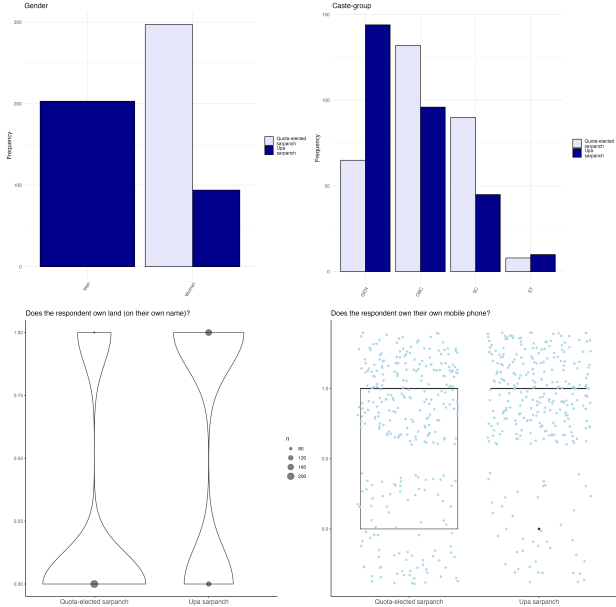
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## VILLAGE ELITES ACCEPT INTERFERENCE



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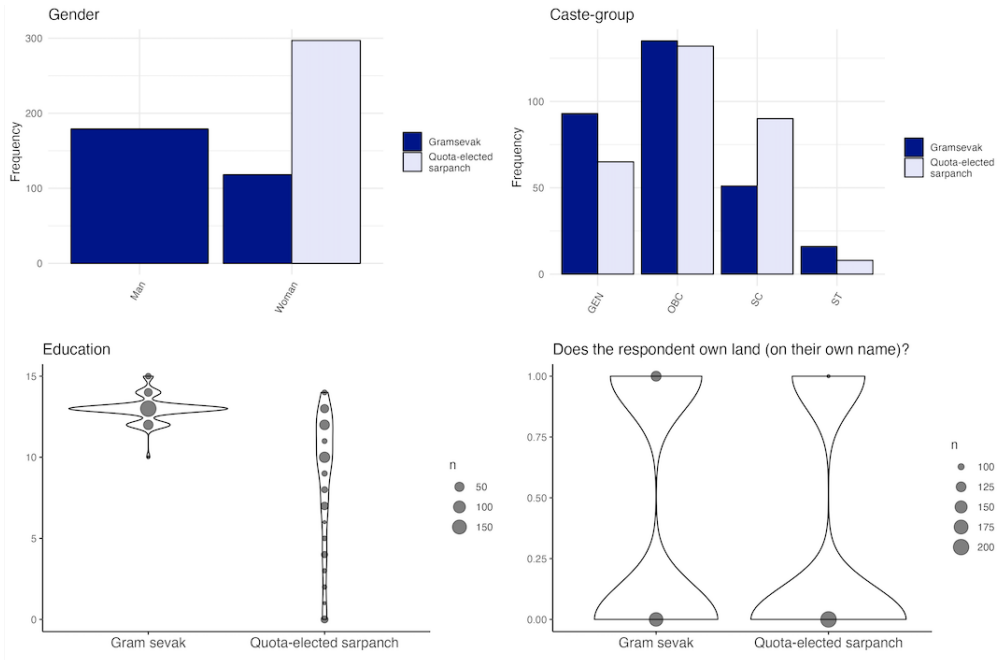
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- ▶ speaks a larger proportion of the time in the group discussion ( $p < 0.001$ )
- ▶ and the gap between the upa sarpanch's speaking proportion and the sarpanch's is significantly larger in the group discussion ( $p < 0.001$ )

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- ▶ is more likely to speak on behalf of the village ( $p < 0.01$ ), on behalf of the sarpanch ( $p < 0.05$ ), and to speak more than the sarpanch ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as take decisions about budgets ( $p < 0.001$ )

# CONCLUSION

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- ▶ Elite male motivations explain paradoxical design & outcome of India's gender-inclusive reform (quotas):
  - design: 3 mechanisms of elite control legislated *contrary* to women's movement recommendations—size, rotation, discretion
  - impact: subversion of the transformative potential of women's large-scale representation
  - outcome: reform helps preserve gender hierarchy & political constraints on elected women across family, village, & local bureaucratic institutions
- ▶ However, quotas open up space for active disruption of gendered *status quo* power distribution in longer-term
- ▶ Case of “instrumental incoherence”: radical, inclusive democratic reforms & retrenchment of increasingly-unconstrained elites