

Inclusive Reforms as Levers for Social Exclusion: The Paradoxical Consequences of Quotas for Women in Rural India

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Abstract

Thirty years into its enactment, we investigate whether a surprisingly radical inclusive reform — the reservation of up to half of all elected heads of local government positions for women in a country known to be “the worst place on earth for women” — significantly contributed to reducing gender hierarchies in politics. While the explicit, stated impact of these reforms was to make governance more inclusive, we argue that the strategic, short-term problem that the architects of reservations actually aimed to solve was not to make governance more inclusive but rather to ensure that male political elites would maintain their grip on power as it became increasingly threatened. Even if reform led to positive, unanticipated social change, “opening up” the state was not meant to emancipate women but rather to enable new electoral coalitions which enabled male elites to retain power. These ulterior motives, we argue, drove the specifics of the reform. Both the strategy adopted to enforce its implementation and the design principles around which it was articulated thus helped preserve gender hierarchy and constraints on elected women in three realms: (a) the family, (b) village institutions and (c) local bureaucracy. We illustrate this with original survey data on power relations between elected women and local male elites in 610 villages of Maharashtra, India.

Keywords: Representation, Quotas, India, Gender, Power, Elections.

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1 Introduction

What explains the simultaneous presence of the world's largest absolute number (and relative proportion) of elected women with some of the highest global rates of gendered violence and exclusion directed against women in public and private spheres? To answer this question, we study a country that many identify as the world's largest democracy, India. We analyze the origins, strategic design, and impact of reforms that we argue are central to contemporary contestation of gendered power: the 1993 Constitutional Amendments that mandated an opening for women in local elected politics of as-yet unprecedented scale, "reservations" for women at the helm of local elected councils (*panchayats*) (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004).

The explicit, stated impact of these reforms was to make governance more inclusive by reserving elected seats for women to lead local governance as the village council (*gram panchayat*) Sarpanch, Pradhan, Chair, or President and council members. Sustained exposure to these reforms altered attitudes, behavior, and institutions around gender and caste relationships (Beaman et al. 2009; Bhavnani 2009; Jensenius 2016; Chauchard 2017; Parthasarathy, Rao and Palaniswamy 2019; Brulé 2020; Heinze, Brulé and Chauchard Forthcoming; Brulé and Tóth 2024). It might thus be counter-intuitive that implementation of reforms saw the rise of a parallel body of folk wisdom about the vitiating of local democracy (and the hollowing out of families) due to the rise of proxy rulers, known as "pradhan patis" or "sarpanch patis" (husbands of elected heads), repeated by state officials including the first Panchayati Raj (Local Government) Minister and multiple Prime Ministers (Ban and Rao 2008; Brulé, Chauchard and Heinze 2022).

We argue that the strategic, short-term problem that the architects of reservations actually wanted to solve was *not* to make local governance more inclusive but rather to ensure that male political elites maintained their grip on power as it

became increasingly threatened (Brulé 2020; Heinze 2024). They did this by seeking to mobilize lower castes and women into the institutions of the local state first and foremost as voters and only secondarily as representatives. In so doing, they provided the most limited quantum of political power – via reservations – to the minimum coalition of non-elites required for these male elites to gain the power to govern (women). This is in line with other strategic behavior by political parties that range from decentralization efforts to the mobilization of women as a coalition of voters that cuts across caste, class, and ideological identities, each of which publicly claim inclusion, while aiming to solve orthogonal, short-term objectives to advance elite actors’ monopoly over power (Faguet and Shami 2022; Chowdhury 2024).

We theorize that elite incentives in “opening up” the state to women leaders were not primarily to emancipate women, but rather to solve the short-term strategic challenge of maintaining their hold on power amidst the implementation of parallel policies with the potential to radically rework political, economic, and social hierarchy along caste lines (Yadav 1999; Jaffrelot 2003; Deshpande and Ramachandran 2019). Additionally, the absence of focus on reservations as a direct aim of mobilization by women’s movements at that time reduced elite incentives to alter gendered political hierarchy (Menon 2000; Jayal 2006; Buch 2009). As a result, we argue that the outcome of reservations broadly was to preserve gender hierarchy despite dynamic pressure from below—both via large-scale women’s movements and the pivotal role of women as voters in driving state and national political electoral outcomes—that elevated women’s role in local and national politics (Omvedt 1987; Singer 2007; Brulé 2020). However, we also anticipate longer-term unanticipated consequences of elite strategy, which provided limited, and yet meaningful disruption of patriarchal forms of power that potentially necessitate further intervention by (predominantly male) elites to achieve their aim of maintaining and consolidating patriarchal power.

We advance our argument in three stages: we first study the historical design of reservations, followed by analysis of the implementation process, and conclude with an investigation into the variation we observe in dominance, and what it tells us about the potential for women’s representation to disrupt patriarchal elite dominance in local governance to further hone the impact of reservations in contemporary India. For each stage of our analysis, we begin by discussing patterns across India and then hone in on the state of Maharashtra. Throughout, we draw from over two years of combined field research alongside unique data that we have collected across 610 *gram panchayats* in rural Maharashtra.¹

2 History

How and why do we see a radically gender-inclusive strategy—reserving up to half of all elected heads of local government positions for women—adopted in a country which by recent counts is the “worst place in the world for women” (Goldsmith and Beresford 2018)? To answer this question, this section retells the history of the decision-making process that led to the adoption of this Constitutional Reform, and theorizes about the likely motivations of the political actors (élites operating at varied levels in government, complemented by those outside the state) who contributed to the legislation of women’s reservations as a core feature of local state institutions.

2.1 Early Legislation

Quotas or “reservations” for women in local-level rural institutions became law in 1992 with the adoption of 73rd Constitutional amendment. Reservations constituted a contentious and yet seemingly small component of the legislation, which included measures to establish a uniform institutional structure for decentralized local gov-

¹See Heinze, Brulé and Chauchard (Forthcoming) for a preview of this data.

ernment across India, replacing state-level initiatives that had prevailed until then.

Notably, despite the absence of a unified political agenda for reservations advanced by women, their increasingly pivotal role as well-informed voters ready to reward—and punish—political parties for demonstrated commitments to women’s political, economic, and social empowerment made decentralization with reservations a preferable tool for national political elites such as Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao to accrue political authority independent of the then-dominant Congress party’s traditional local intermediaries: landed, upper caste, male elites (Bohlken Thomas 2015; Brulé 2020, 71-2). By imposing more inclusive, regularly elected *panchayats* with reserved seats for women alongside other disadvantaged groups including members of traditionally-excluded “scheduled” castes and tribes (SCs/STs), the act fundamentally disrupted the *status quo* distribution of political power and pushed seemingly progressive representational practices frequently, although not uniformly, out of sync with local social, political, and economic norms (Datta 2000).

The 73rd amendment, with its explicit inclusion of reservations for women is the culmination of over a century of deliberations, ranging from informal conferences that laid the groundwork for governance prior to Indian Independence to high-level commissions convened by the Indian state, and extending to action within states grounded in large-scale women’s movements. Until remarkably late in the process, in fact, state-driven proposals to include women in governance at the local level were formally legislated as propositions that were far more modest numerically, and far less gender-progressive, than measures eventually written into national law by (exclusively) male elites. Yet comparisons of legislation alone miss a far more radical site of action: women-led changes in local politics through grassroots organization and coalitions that occur primarily outside political party-based mobilization. We briefly examine both forms of gendered political change.

2.1.1 State-led Reforms: the cases of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, & Karnataka

Many of the early proposals first emerged from the states themselves, over the course of what initially appear as isolated efforts to build institutions from the ground-up to constitute a system of local government. Here, we compare neighboring states, considering those with early calls for reforms that failed and those with agendas that succeeded. What stands out as instructive of successes is the role of emergent political parties with strategic agendas to distinguish themselves from what was then the monolithic political party, Congress, by claiming credit for their distinctive role empowering an often-overlooked, and near-universally marginalized group of voters: women. In other words, successful attempts at further including women were tied to the existence of clear electoral incentives to mobilize women as constituents.

One particularly instructive case is that of the South Indian state of Kerala. Despite being frequently lionized as a leader in gender equality alongside innovation to build local institutions of participatory democratic governance (Heller, Harilal and Chaudhuri 2007), a relative absence of pressure to mobilize women constituents meant that male élites' concern with women's severe constraints to accessing representation did not lead to concrete reforms before 1991, a mere few years before the 73rd amendment was enacted at the Union level, despite being debated since at least the end of the 1970s (Saradamoni 1982; Brulé 2020, 83).

By contrast, we observe women's reservations becoming law in another South Indian state - Andhra Pradesh - as of the early 1980s, precisely because political actors saw the electoral value of mobilizing women. Women had actively campaigned for social reform across Andhra in the prior decade, with the state capital, Hyderabad the home of what Kumar (1999, 345) calls India's first "contemporary feminist" organization: the Progressive Organization of Women. More generally, as documented in (Brulé 2020, 87), the early 1980s were distinctive in Andhra Pradesh

for the coherence and visibility of the women's movement, which mobilized against dowry and rape, although representation via reservations was not a core demand.

However as of 1982, a new political party championed by a newly-minted politician, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP)'s Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao (NTR), saw the explicit courting of women's votes as an opportunity to gain an autonomous voter base (Ibid, 88). The TDP developed women's welfare as a core plank in its manifesto, arguing "Telugu Desam will see that women's welfare does not remain a mere slogan. It will guarantee their legitimate rights" (Shatrugna 1984, 108). NTR and the TDP's political strategy in Andhra Pradesh proved successful, leading to a dramatic shift in women's voting behavior. Whereas the majority of women voters supported Congress in 1980, just 39 percent did so in the 1983 elections (Brulé 2020, 90). In 1983, a majority of women voted for the newly-formed TDP, with analysts arguing "the women's vote edged the Telugu Desam into office" (Singer 2007, 148). Immediately thereafter, the TDP instituted 9 percent reservations for women as members of local elected councils or *Panchayats*, and by 1989 they went further, reserving 20-25 percent of elected positions in villages for women and 9 percent of elected local council heads, known as *Sarpanches*, *Pradhans*, or *Presidents* for women (Singer 2007, 148, 103). This suggests that, from the start, reforms to reserve seats for women may have had more to do with electoral incentives than with sincere efforts to empower women and/or give women the upper hand in local governance.

Indeed, loopholes were clear from the beginning: if no elected women *Sarpanch* candidates existed, men could "co-opt" a woman of their choice (Brulé 2020, 95). In the absence of agitation or oversight by women, the TDP was able to claim significant credit as "revolutionary" and likely to "transform" women's role in society despite their absence of investment in any bureaucratic enforcement mechanisms without

which this new representation would have substantial effects on the ground.²

Next door, the Janata Party led by Hedge in Karnataka won a decisive victory in 1985 following a remarkably similar playbook. As in Andhra Pradesh, the state had been a stronghold of the dominant Congress party which was disrupted by women. While the Janata Party initially came to power via a narrow victory in 1983, the 1985 elections was distinctive as the first “overwhelmingly positive vote” for the Janata Party with Hedge at the helm (Raghavan and Manor 2009, 199). Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu and Jayraj (1987, 591) argue “the Janata party could get an edge over Congress(I) at the last minute when it put out its supplementary Manifesto promising populist measures such as Rs. 2/- a kilo of rice, Janata Sarees and Dhotis at subsidised rates, etc., which swung the women voters in favour of Hedge.”

Karnataka’s Hedge wasted no time after taking office in 1983 to lay the groundwork for mobilizing women voters. Within 24 hours of taking office, he commissioned his Minister of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Abdul Nazirsab, to draft a bill for decentralizing power via local *Panchayats* (councils) with fifty percent of seats reserved for women (Raghavan and Manor 2009, 152-4). While the final version of the legislation included only 25 percent quota or “reservation” for women, in the *Karnataka Zilla Parishads, Taluk Panchayat Samithis, Mandal Panchayats, and Nyaya Panchayats Act of 1985*, it provided a path-breaking model for inclusion along both gender and caste lines, reserving 18 percent of seats for traditionally excluded members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and one seat in each council for an SC/ST woman (Raghavan and Manor 2009, 157). Elections for these new positions were not held until 1987, but they became the model for India’s 1993 Constitutional Amendments mandating decentralized government with reservations for women and members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Brulé 2020, 101).

²Andhra Pradesh State Legislative Assembly debates, 1985 in Brulé (2020, 91-5).

Following Andhra Pradesh's TDP, Karnataka's Janata Party claimed credit as the leading advocate for women, and set aside 30 percent of seats in urban elections for women (Raghavan and Manor 2009, 156). According to Rajasekhariah, Jayaramu and Jayraj (1987, 591), this policy was strategically effective not just in Karnataka but nationally, "inspiring extremely favorable political and popular responses, first in Karnataka and later elsewhere in the country" (Ibid). These policies advanced, in part, because women did not face the wholesale political exclusion that was evident in Kerala's failed calls for reservations. As Devaki Jain (1996, 9) articulates, "women's entry in large numbers into local government arose from a mixture of political opportunism and an ethical sensibility that regarded the implications of gender as integral... Critically, it arose from the actions of both women and men" (Kudva 2003, 448). Yet the disjuncture between women's political engagement and women's political agendas is notable, given the consistent absence of pressure from an organized "women's movement" for quotas in the two states at the forefront of reforms: Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (Brulé 2020; Sen 2002, 504).

2.1.2 Bottom-up vs. Top-down Reforms: the case of Maharashtra

The history of women's inclusion in local political institutions in Maharashtra state—the site of our empirical research, which we present in section 4—similarly suggests that reservations were a tool opportunistically used by male elites as tools for political parties to mobilize women voters, with one additional nuance.

In Maharashtra, the instrumental use of reservations occurred alongside substantial and radical mobilization by women's organizations. A women's conference, organized by an independent farmers' organization called the Shetkari Sanghatana, in November 1986 in Chandwad (Omvedt 1990, 1689) for instance, resolved to organize a "mass collective fight for power in the *zilla parishads*" or district councils through running "all-women panels" of local governments which coalesced as the

'idea' of *Samagra Mahila Aghadi* or the "All-Women's Front" (Ibid).

Opposition to this radical form of women's representation was fierce not only from established political parties on the left and democratic center, but even from the organizing party, the Shetkari Sanghatana itself (Omvedt 1987, 1990, 1687-9). Despite this opposition, "a good deal of enthusiasm from women" catalyzed attempts "to organise such panels and try to capture the panchayats" across "many villages scattered throughout the state" (Omvedt 1990, 1689). By the early 1990s, Omvedt (2005, 4748) counted at least 10-11 all-women panels, with adequate numbers by 2000 to fill an entire book (Datta 2000).

Despite their numerically limited scope, analyses suggest that broader shifts in power accompany all-women elected panels: the inclusion and foregrounding of women from traditionally-excluded castes, tribes, and classes is frequently prioritized, with substantial action to advance collective interests, from large-scale provision of drinking water, biogas plants, toilets and electricity particularly in Dalit residences, to amenities for village schools (Omvedt 1990; Datta 2000). Women's political representation in all-women's panels thus extends beyond symbolic, superficial, political strategy by male élites to enable meaningful change for all citizens.

While the leaders of state- and national-level women's movements prioritized work to integrate the structure of these promising experiments with all-women panels into national legislation, the structure of reservations created by the 73rd Amendment that was adopted in 1993—and implemented by the main parties and the male élites that dominated them—arguably came in opposition to this work. This further illustrates the ways in which the form that reservations took had little to do with a promise for radical social change in favor of gender equality. Indeed, in contrast to the meaningful, if geographically-limited success of all-women's panels across Maharashtra in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Maharashtra state government's work to

implement Centrally-mandated women's reservations in 1994 received substantial criticism by scholars as strategically "co-opting Feminism" (Guru 1994).

Maharashtra state's policy-drafting process and (limited) investment in policy implementation is instructive. Guru (1994, 2063-5) argues:

"The hidden meaning of the policy document seems to be related to the short-term goal of the ruling party and the long-term goal of the ruling class. As it is rightly observed by some of the women's activists, the government has formulated this policy out of the need to enlist the support of women for the coming assembly elections...The Maharashtra government has been very shrewd in using 'mock liberalism' to achieve these hidden goals... to serve as an effective means of self-defence of the ruling class... [which] is legitimising it[s ideology] through the incorporation of certain elements of feminist ideology in such a way so as to neutralise its potential antagonism. It is quite clear that the state will use all these ideological means to maintain its hegemony."

If political calculations were indeed a major factor in the political incorporation of women as key voters, this clarifies the rationale driving the Maharashtra state government's initial decision to postpone the very level of elections at which women—organizing within the main opposition party, the Shetkari Sanghatana—sought to mobilize a "mass collective fight for power": the *zilla parishads* (district councils) immediately after this resolution was made, in 1987 (Omvedt 1987, 1990). If so, state efforts not only to disrupt a *de facto* alliance between opposition parties, but further to claim credit as the leading advocate of women's *formal inclusion*, via legislation of reservations in 1994, emerge as a logically-consistent, rational political strategy.

2.2 The Path to Union-level Legislation

In parallel to development in the states, the question of reservation for women entered the national scene through the proceedings of several commissions. Core elite proposals were modest and regressive, diverging from demands by women's movements until the "sudden general acceptability of women's reservations" in the very last deliberations around the 73rd Amendment (Menon 2000, 3836).

Two justifications coalesced in public discourse to justify support for women's reservations: first, politicians note the need to achieve development imperatives, with women identified as "special cases" for advancing equitable economic development (Singer 2007, 90); second, and equally visibly, elites pointed at the "vocal and visible" role of women, both as voters and more importantly within autonomous women's groups that had "emerged as a significant force in politics" whose influence contrasted starkly with their political under-representation (Menon 2000, 3836).

Developmental rhetoric emerged front and center in 1974, when the Government of India-appointed Committee on the Status of Women brought the extreme, increasing scope of gender inequality to the forefront of considerations about national development. They defined the need for more gender-equal representation as paramount for addressing women's "backwardness" (Sen 2002; Brulé 2020; Singer 2007, 146). This framing gave the 1978 Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions headed by Asoka Mehta – the key committee that set the wheels in motion for the 73rd Constitutional Amendment – fodder for their argument to advance more representative, and radically well-resourced *panchayat* institutions with the power to tax citizens, run schools, and resolve local development challenges by "dismantling... the local governing powers of bureaucrats [as vestiges of colonial rule]...to regulate life in the countryside" (Singer 2007, 101).

The proposals of The Mehta committee's recommendations on how to ad-

vance women's voices in local decision-making processes were however not exactly radical, illustrating the preferences of its male elite members. In line with earlier practices, the Committee recommended the reservation of two seats for women in *panchayats* and proposed the co-optation of women absent their direct election. The tension between the Committee's stated assertion that they prioritized improvement of *panchayat* representativeness and effectiveness versus their continued support of women's representation via co-optation—which prior Commissions such as the Santhanam commission had clearly identified as a source of sub-optimal representation that hindered development (Singer 2007)—suggests that political alignment preceded advancing inclusive development for the Mehta Committee.

As women's political clout became self-evident in the 1980s, women became better-included in policy design and the focus of much attention by politicians who faced increasing pressure to build new electoral bases. As of 1988, the Union government commissioned the National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP), as a broad report on ways to improve the situation of women across India. Women's movement leaders and members of women's organizations now joined the core group of decision-makers drafting the NPP. This new leadership aligned with women's increasing muscle as voters—starting with Indira Gandhi's successful attraction of women voters as core to the Congress victory in 1980, followed by the lightning-fast ascent of the TDP in 1983 thanks to women voters, and a reported 'sympathy wave' by women that brought "orphaned Rajiv Gandhi [and] Congress [back] to power" in 1984 (Brulé 2020; Singer 2007, 130).

As shown by Mazumdar (1989), women's seat at the policy-making table was consequential: when the time-honored strategy of selecting women representatives via co-optation reemerged as the default proposal in the NPP, "women's organizations' primary objective opposed nomination [of providing women's representation

via means] of co-option” which “would be subversion of the constitution and all democratic norms” ...[and] “has not, in four decades, improved women’s lot in rural areas (Mazumdar 1989, 2795) .”

While the Committee proposed multiple elements of reservations that appear in line with the subsequent national Constitutional Amendments—including the central proposal that there should be reservation of at least 30% *directly elected* seats for women in all rural local self-governing bodies—the areas of dissonance are particularly instructive. Specifically, the NPP recommended a position long advocated by the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi, a peasant women’s collective founded in 1986, that a certain percentage of constituencies in the lower tier of local institutions should be declared as *exclusively* women’s constituencies, will *all* executive positions in a certain number of territorial jurisdictions reserved for women candidates (Menon 2000; Omvedt 1990, 3837). This argument was built on the broader experience of reservations in Maharashtra’s *panchayats* where, absent all-women panels, “relatives of established male leaders are fielded, and there has been no impact at all on inefficiency and corruption” (Menon 2000).

In light of the preliminary rejection of two radical proposals advanced by women’s organizations within the NPP which were both meant to ensure the autonomy of elected women representatives—complete rejection of co-option as a tool to ensure women’s representation and a mandate for all-women panchayats in “certain constituencies”—leaders in the women’s movement acknowledge that they accepted symbolic representation of women, *all directly elected*, via 30% reservations rather than full descriptive representation linked to population (50%)—as in the formulas that calculate representation for members of backward castes—based on the argument that “pragmatically, [...] something is better than nothing” (Mazumdar 1989, 2796). Thus, women’s organizations prioritized radical change in selec-

tion mechanisms—jettisoning co-optation and ensuring women could form political coalitions across caste and class—in exchange for moderating the scale of representation, from descriptive representation (50% reservations as half of the population) to symbolic representation (30% of seats for women in all rural local self-governing bodies, from village *panchayats* to district-level *zilla parishads*, with reservation of 30% of executive heads of all bodies from *gram panchayats* to *zilla parishads* for women).

This tussle between women's organizations and male elites around the issues of *how* to provide political representation to *how many* women highlights that male elite strategic motivations may not have been in sync with some of their grand public declarations. It is indeed striking to note that the single most progressive and radical aspect of these recommendations—all-women's *panchayats*—was not retained by law-makers. Similarly, it is significant that the report, strongly influenced by the presence of women's organizations did not suggest, contrary to what the 73rd amendment ended up enshrining in law, that reservations for women were only allowable if they were associated with a principle of rotation (that is, if reservations are time-limited, and withdrawn after a set number of electoral rounds). In fact, the instance of all-female *panchayats* without any time limitation suggest that the authors of the NPP explicitly saw the need to provide women with stable positions and to limit the influence of men in their selection and/or in women's actions in office.

Indeed, the leap between the relatively-progressive proposals in the NPP to the final version of the Constitutional Reform indicates the bargaining dynamics that drove the final document: women's organizations secured overt commitments to direct, democratic election of women (rather than co-optation) in exchange for severe limitations to the number of representatives (30% seats reserved for women rather than 50% or all-women's panels) and terms (rotation, usually every election).

Reservations thus appeared clearly, for the first time, in the eventually-rejected

proposition for a 64th constitutional amendment.³ This bill mandated that "as nearly as may be to thirty per cent (including number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every *panchayat* shall be reserved for women and allotted by rotation to different constituencies in the *panchayats*." From here on, the principle of women's participation in local bodies through reservation appears to be accepted. Its acceptance however occurs in conjunction with a principle that no women's organization ever embraced: rotation, which limits women's time in office.

The Seventy Third Constitution Amendment Act, a modified version of the 64th Constitution Amendment Bill, gave this principle a formal shape. The act mandates that no less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) of the total seats to be filled by direct election in every *panchayat* shall be reserved for women and allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a *panchayat*. Importantly, and here in line with the NPP recommendation that had disappeared from the 64th amendment, the Act also provided for reservation of one third of the total number of offices of *chairpersons* at all levels. As noted by Buch (2009), this key addition thus came very late in the legislation process, and after much hesitation and debate.⁴ The journey of women's reservations into legislation was thus tentative and slow with the reluctant addition of the chairperson's post only in the last version of the national bill.

This sequence of events in sum suggests that a policy of reservation of seats

³The 64th Amendment couldn't be enacted because of countrywide protests and the ruling party's failure to gather required support in both houses of Parliament.

⁴The 64th Amendment Bill did not provide for reservation of chairperson posts, leaving to state legislature's discretion any reservations in favour of SC/ST/women. The V.P. Singh government, when it took power from Congress in 1989, revised the bill to "not less than one-third" in membership by rotation, without reservation for the chair. When Congress returned to power in 1991 it reserved "not less than one-third" of seats, including chairpersons, for women in the 73rd Amendment.

that were seen as unthinkable for mainstream political parties a mere decade earlier was agreed upon relatively quickly by national élites from all parties by 1992. These reservations ended up being more democratic as well as slightly-more numerically ambitious—with the reservation of 1/3 of *directly elected* seats for women, and deeper, with the inclusion of reservation *for chairpersons*—than early state practices entailed. While women’s organizations unmistakably played a role in this process, their most progressive propositions for the form of reservations were systematically ignored in national legislation. Instead, lawmakers (national, partisan, male élites) granted reservations on their own terms, based on institutional choices *not* embraced by women’s organizations (Singer 2007, 122-4). Besides, as we shall develop, they did so absent effort to ensure reform implementation in a socially-regressive context. Altogether, this leads to a paradoxical outcome: on the one hand, a landmark societal reform in the name of women’s empowerment was indeed adopted relatively rapidly. On the other hand, the specifics of the reform (with decisions taken at the last minute, advancing symbolic rather than full descriptive representation of women, and the principle of rotation introduced explicitly in contradiction to models advocated by women’s movement leaders) suggests that these law-makers likely privileged personal and party-based strategic political interests—which benefited from women’s continued dependence on male-led parties, bureaucracies, and families—over the genuine empowerment of women as autonomous political actors.

3 How Ulterior Motives Drove Reservations Design

This inconsistency between the impressive scope of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the relative absence of strategies around the modalities of its implementation, we argue, betrays a tension between *stated* and *ulterior* strategic motives.

As noted by Singer (2007), stated motives were largely “developmental”: in-

ducing greater levels of women's representation in local institutions was justified as necessary to improve the efficiency of development programs at the grassroots level. Although the Act itself made no mention of this rationale, declarations of Congress leaders at the time, and subsequent interpretations of the measure do tend to push this narrative: more descriptive representation is necessary to generate outcomes that are overall more representative of a broader set of developmental needs to which women are typically identified as being more committed to advance: food security, health, clean water, and child development; besides, the inclusion of women in institutions would bring a different type of "Clean and Green" politics into institutions (Singer 2007, 142, 135). Rajiv Gandhi, introducing the failed 64th amendment in Parliament on 15th May 1989 explained the rationale for "securing reservations for women so as to fully involve them in the management of Community Affairs":

"We propose the reservation in Panchayats at all levels of 30 per cent of the seats for women. There are three major reasons for which we believe this Constitutional innovation to be necessary. First, women constitute half the population and are involved in rather more than half the economic life of rural India. . . Second, the sound finance of the household has traditionally been the responsibility of the women. 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 the India's ancient culture and traditions. It is to them that is entrusted the responsibility of transmitting to the next generation the quintessential values, standards, and ideals which have enabled our civilization to survive and flourish without a break despite vicissitudes of many kinds. It is that strength of moral character which women will bring to the Panchayats." (as cited by Abraham in 2020⁵)

⁵<https://countercurrents.org/2020/08/tribute-to-rajiv-gandhi-a-champion-of-panchayati-raj/>

As should by now be clear, ulterior strategic motives however appear to have existed since the first reforms, including early proposals of reservations that were debated in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. As the historical accounts presented above suggest, opportunistic electoral motivations fueled the relatively quick national embrace of women's reservations—over a decade—by elite male politicians.

We add here that another contextual factor may have driven elite male consensus for legislating women's reservations: caste, and specifically, the desire by upper-caste and class men to re-balance power in their favor just as the Mandal Commission recommended expansion of political, economic, and educational opportunities for backward classes (Kohli 1992; Menon 2000; Jaffrelot 2003). Though we lack evidence explicitly showing that these concerns drove male elite behavior, it is credible that caste may have played a role: the expectation that women (whom parties presumed would be drawn from upper-castes and classes) would alter the balance of power in favor of (male) elites is plausible following the decisive "influx of people increasingly from lower orders of society into the arena of democratic contestation" in the 1980s and early 1990s (Menon 2000; Yadav 1999, 2397).

To consider the ways in which electoral and status precarity may have intersected, we briefly consider the role of three sets of actors: the male elite leaders heading the two major political parties competing for power just prior to reservations' implementation, and the elite legislators who stood to benefit from their parties' continued power. First, consider Rajiv Gandhi, who proposed women's reservations in advance of the 1989 national elections in his role at the helm of the then-dominant Congress party, "both to enhance the patronage powers of the Congress at the expense of opposition-controlled state governments and to counteract the image of Rajiv's government as elitist and out of touch with the people" (Kohli 1992, 58). One factor why this first round of constitutional amendments failed to gain the needed

two-thirds majority in the upper house of Parliament (*Rajya Sabha*) may be that the precarity of male upper caste élite power was not yet salient enough to motivate legislation. The tenuous nature of upper caste dominance became much clearer under the opposition government that came to power in 1989, led by VP Singh.

In contrast, incentives to mobilize lower castes were much clearer for VP Singh and the broader coalition of parties seeking to shift power away from Congress. Leading the Janata Dal—a broad coalition of opposition parties—VP Singh campaigned on caste-based representation, promising to “implement forth-with the recommendations of the Mandal Commission” with expansive reservations for backward classes in education, employment, and government (Jaffrelot 2003, 337). Upon election, VP Singh did exactly that, leading to a real “transfer of power from élite groups to the subalterns” which Singh predicted “will ultimately be reflected in the social composition of the local bodies, state governments, and the central government. A silent transfer of power is taking place in social terms” (Jaffrelot 2003, 350).

This brings us to the third set of actors potentially motivated by caste concerns: élite legislators. Reflecting on the substantial decline of élite, upper caste male representation at all levels of representative government, which Jaffrelot (2003) later documents, it is plausible that legislators may have considered reservations for women in local government based on the assumption that women could be controlled. Such logic is justified by what Buch (2004, 121) calls the “carryover of feudal and patriarchal mindset[s]” that presume male élites can limit access to the local state primarily to upper caste women, who would occupy subordinate gendered roles. Indeed, subsequent research documents that (general) women’s reservations typically elect upper-caste women, and that caste-based practices and status encourage the subset of upper-caste women representatives not to disrupt *status quo* gender and caste power (Karekurve-Ramachandra and Lee 2020; Brulé and Tóth 2024).

If the “sudden general acceptability of women’s reservations” was indeed due in part to elite, upper caste male-led political party concerns about “the vicious spectre of casteism [that] has begun haunting the party system” with the potential “degeneration of parliament into a ‘caste panchayats’ union” as Chandan Mitra later bemoans (Menon 2000, 3838), this would explain why the most progressive recommendation by women’s movement leaders and activists—all-female panels of *panchayat* candidates—was effectively dead upon arrival.

The contrast between the caste-based alliances formed in the presence of more limited reservations versus in the presence of all-women’s panels is instructive. According to studies by Hirway (1989) and Nair (1997), women’s *panchayat* reservations are associated with governance that strengthens the entrenched power of the dominant castes (Menon 2000, 3837). In contrast, the all-women’s panels for *panchayat* elections that women and their male allies built in Maharashtra following the Shetkari Sanghatana-catalyzed campaign mobilized women *from all castes*.⁶

Whether or not caste-related panic or more general electoral motivations played a central role, it remains clear that motives were far from exclusively developmental. This may thus cast doubt on the veracity of male élites’ stated ambitions to change the gendered practice of power and/or provide elected women with substantial influence. The existence of these multiple motives (and specifically, of ulterior electoral and identity motives) arguably explains that reform, while it was adopted, was designed in a way that did not provide a strong institutional framework to realize the

⁶Indeed, Gala (1997, 36) documents cases such as Yenora in Wardha District, where all women candidates “were selected from the dalits and other ‘low’ castes.” If ruling elites consider reservations for women acceptable “as a counter-measure to deal with rising backward caste presence” in politics, as Menon (2000, 3838) suggests, a truly autonomous women’s movement with the capacity to make effective, radically disruptive alliances across caste lines might not be seen as “a force that can restore the control of upper castes and classes” but rather as a threat to social order worthy of opposition at all costs.

twin objectives of women's meaningful political inclusion and subsequent change in governance. Specifically, three key aspects of the reform suggest that political reservations for women were designed and implemented to mobilize and engage women voters but NOT to grant elected women substantial powers that would fundamentally alter *status quo* governance.

First, from a legal standpoint, the Amendment granted states discretion to decide on the specific modalities of reservations' implementation: formally, the Act defines a few broad principles which it encourages states to follow in whatever form they use to establish a three-tier system of elected councils (*Panchayats*). In choosing to do so, it left many specific, but potentially strategic, decisions to state-level élites. This strategic decision opened the door in a predictable way to disappointing outcomes in terms of inclusion and social change, give that it relinquished the specifics of the implementation of the law to predictably regressive male élites. Evidence of the regressive interpretation of the act across states can for instance be seen in the fact that NO state decided to reserve more than 1/3 of the positions for women, when the Act merely stated that at least 1/3 of the positions ought to be reserved. The same mechanism allowed most states to keep a tight lid on *panchayat* finances since 1993, preventing dramatic shifts in public budgets. As noted by Jayal (2006)

: "...the provisions for decentralization were interpreted in a rather tight-fisted fashion by most states, resulting in an inadequate devolution of powers, functions and finances to the institutions of local governance... Several states failed to constitute the District Planning Committee, which was charged with the task of synthesizing and harmonizing the planning process emanating from the village level. In some sense, then, it appears that the democratizing project of inclusion was energized more substantively than the project of decentralization, and it is hardly surprising that

the inadequacies of the latter should adversely impact the former.”

Besides, the fact that states have had vast leeway over the specifics of the Act led to even more shocking provisions, such as the two-child norm or the provision for no-confidence motions. While the former legally excluded from the right to run many women (all those who had more than two children), the second provision allowed for a relatively easy replacement of the *panchayat*’s chairperson or president. As noted by Jayal (2006), this provision has been systematically (mis)used by male vice presidents to unseat female heads, and take control of the *panchayat* themselves.

Second, the fact that male élites attached the principle of rotation, limiting the time women occupy office to a fixed number of electoral rounds—a principle that need not have featured in the act, and was emphatically rejected by voices in the women’s movement when drafting the NPP—to reservations is particularly telling. Further, the fact that state-level elites subsequently interpreted this provision of the 73rd Amendment in the most limiting way possible in nearly all states confirms that élite intentions were not to design a system through which women would gain an autonomous political status, but rather to preclude such potential social change. Because most states have since 1993 interpreted the principle of rotation as having to happen *at every electoral period* (save Tamil Nadu, where seats are reserved for two consecutive electoral periods), most elected women cannot remain in office for more than a single term. This prevents, in an entirely predicted and predictable manner, the emergence of a critical mass of experienced female politicians, and betrays the regressive intentions of the male élites who also passed this landmark reform.

Third and finally, it is important to stress that either the Act itself or subsequent state-based efforts could have included measures to better address the counter-normative nature of the reform. To the extent such measures have emerged, they have done so only in the past few years. For example, it is likely consequential that

the Act chose to entirely ignore political parties: whether or not candidates for local election can officially run on partisan planks, although legislators in 1993 were well aware that partisan élites have substantial influence over *panchayat* operations. Yet, neither mandatory training, let alone more heavy-handed strategies (the institution of quotas within parties might have been one) were institutionalized. Instead, reservations appear to have created a symbolically vast, but strategically “constrained space” for women. These constraints were clear to reform’s intended beneficiaries:

“many women argued that this 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—rather than a minimum representation—a glass ceiling or quota that limited women’s participation” (Singer 2007, 124).

These constraints may have been attractive to Rajiv Gandhi, who saw the potential of reservations to shore up a victory with a wavering rural voter constituency, leading him to advocate for 30% women’s reservations as early as 1988 (Gala 1997, 33).

Similarly, it is likely consequential that neither the Act nor state-based implementations of it spent time preparing the bureaucracy, through training or more structural reforms, for the imminent arrival in office of hundreds of thousands of elected officials without political experience, who were predictably likely to enter very unequal working relationships as politicians within families, village political machines, and bureaucracies (Buch 2004). Last, it is telling that neither the Act nor state-level implementations engaged, until recently, in serious efforts to change the mentalities of men (both as voters and as relatives) and encourage new norms about gendered political leadership (Heinze, Brulé and Chauchard Forthcoming).

Altogether, both deliberate attempts at undercutting the most promising proposals emanating from the women’s movements and what can *at best* be considered

negligence (the absence of initiatives to ensure that a shocking counter-normative reform would lead to its stated objectives of social change) gave birth to a relatively paradoxical reform which allowed for both gendered political inclusion on an unprecedented scale while ensuring that this inclusion would not lead to fundamental disruption of gendered power. While reservations did allow for women's presence on a massive scale, and even for unanticipated benefits (which merit further research), we contend that reform also helped preserve gendered domination by three groups of male élites: relatives (especially husbands), village élites, and bureaucrats.

We investigate the persistence of gendered dominance—which may endure despite the upswing of women's political mobilization and pivotal role as voters—three decades into the reform by leveraging new micro-level data from Maharashtra.

4 The empirical reality 30 years later: Maharashtra data

Thirty years after the enactment of substantial reservations for women in local government, have they fundamentally “opened up” political space for women or helped preserved the micro-level institutions of patriarchal power in families, the village-level state, and the local bureaucracy?

A major critique of reservations leveled across the spectrum—from leaders in the women's movement seeking gender equality to centrist bureaucrats and politicians seeking to preserve the *status quo*—was the state's limited investment in the capacity of elected women representatives to govern. Indeed, feminist scholars within the women's movement suggested that reservations were designed not merely in the absence of “disruptive” grassroots women's movements critiquing state policy, but by seeking to co-opt women's movement members who could be “led into non-confrontationist channels” whereby state policy would minimize disruptions to *status quo* power (Menon 2000, 3838). Indeed, Guru (1994, 2064) argues:

“the government has not worked out any mechanism which would establish conditions under which women would realise power without any compulsion of class, caste and gender domination...According to a woman *panchayat* member most of the women elected on *panchayati raj* institution either through reservation or directly have to act as proxy of their husbands or parents, co-operative ‘kings’ or the village lords. And if those women try to assert their legitimate sense of power or protest against the male domination, they are suppressed by men”.

We investigate the impact of three decades of reservations for women as heads of local government in rural Maharashtra on women representative’s ability to disrupt male dominance in three sites: within their family, arguably the primary site of politics (Prillaman 2024); with village-élites (mostly men) who control political parties, caste councils, and the mechanics of state influence in society (Brulé 2020); and in their relationships with bureaucrats, the hierarchy that Rajiv Gandhi precisely pledged to disrupt through implementing reservations (Singer 2007, 101).

4.1 Data & Identification Strategy

We leverage original, micro-level survey data on local-level power dynamics from across 610 villages in rural Maharashtra. Appendix A details our sampling strategy, survey structure, as well as descriptive data on those interviewed. Our main analyses draw from five interrelated instruments. The first is an interview of the president (*sarpanch*) of each council; we use this instrument to measure the *sarpanch*’s characteristics and her self-perceptions of centrality in the village council. The second targets six key informants in each village,⁷ and is used to generate several reputation-based measures of the *sarpanch*’s centrality. The third is an interview of the village bu-

⁷Interviews balanced by gender and caste. Sampling strategy in Appendix A.

reacrat (*gram sevak*), used to develop reputation-based measures of centrality and collect administrative data. The fourth is an interview of the village vice president, the *upa sarpanch*, used to gather information about the *upa sarpanch* and his/her perceptions of local power dynamics. The last instrument, described in Appendix A, is based on a standardized group discussion between the *sarpanch*, the council vice president (the *upa sarpanch*, an individual nominated among the council members), and the *gram sevak*. From this, we generate reputational and behavioral measures of the *sarpanch*'s centrality in actual decision-making.

Though some of our analyses are purely descriptive, a large component of our work explores the *causal impact* of gender quotas that “reserve” the *sarpanch* seat for women on the measures of dominance we investigate in each subsection. We exploit the fact that gender quotas are *randomly* allocated for causal identification (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004) and show evidence of this in Appendix B. In Maharashtra, half of village councils are randomly assigned to receive a gender quota for the president seat, with replacement, each electoral cycle. This enables us to estimate the causal impact of being a quota-elected woman *sarpanch*, rather than a non-quota-elected (most often) man *sarpanch*.

4.2 Family institutions of dominance

Following three decades of reservations for women elected heads of local government, do we see what Gothoskar, Gandhi and Shah (1994, 3022) call “revolutions, big or small” in elected representatives’ families that enable the “fundamental transformation” of patriarchal society that activists in the women’s movement and feminist scholars argued were crucial for reservations to advance political gender equality? Questions about the possibility of intra-familial revolutions in particular remain a live issue, with a recent case in the Indian Supreme Court brought by an NGO,

Mundona Rural Development Foundation, requesting judicial intervention in *panchayats* given “State Governments had not been able to prevent men from acting as ‘sarpanch-pati, sarpanch-devar, pradhan-pati’ [where gender quotas apply] while wielding the actual political and decision-making power” (Rajagopal 2023).

To answer, we begin by investigating patterns in the allocation of the most fundamental, scarce resource within families of elected *panchayat* heads: time inside and outside the household. To study this, we compare families where the elected representative is a woman, due to the application of reservation-imposed gender quotas, versus families where representatives are elected in the absence of these quotas, bringing predominantly-male representatives to power. We next consider the distribution of intra-household bargaining power based on the spousal distribution of access to complementary resources: land in one’s name, and mobility based on the capacity of a given family member to travel alone and more specifically to drive. Finally, we compare objective and subjective assessments of political influence between (quota versus non-quota) elected leaders and their spouses.

4.2.1 Time Allocation within Families

A core feature of democratic polities is the integral role of *public* political engagement between elected leaders and *all* citizens which enables the development and advancement of preferences and policies that advance collective welfare (Mansbridge 1999). Yet the gendered division of labor enforced by patriarchal (heterosexual married) families which expects women to ‘specialize’ by devoting their time exclusively to private, intra-household labor with men devoting their time to public, extra-household (political, social, and economic) work makes such engagement effectively impossible for women (Htun 2016; Brulé 2020; Prillaman 2024). Thus, a core measure of the capacity for women’s quotas to disrupt patriarchal familial organization is the distribution of married partners’ allocation of time to work inside versus

outside the household. To analyze this, Figure 1's upper panel compares the number of hours elected government heads (*Sarpanches*) report working inside the home (the horizontal axis) to those reported by their spouse (the vertical axis). To understand the role of gender quotas, we compare spousal time distribution in the presence of quotas on the left—where elected heads are exclusively-women, and spouses are men—versus this distribution in the absence of quotas on the right—where elected heads are almost-exclusively men and spouses women.

In Figure 1, if gender quotas completely reversed the patriarchal distribution of gendered power within familial organization, we should first see the balance of time spent on intra-household work reverse from a predominantly-woman driven provision of intra-household labor to predominantly man-driven provision of intra-household labor. In the case of gender quota-reserved seats (left hand side of the figure), we would expect to see observations clustered on the left side of the identity line, indicating that the sarpanch's spouse spends produces the majority of intra-household labor.

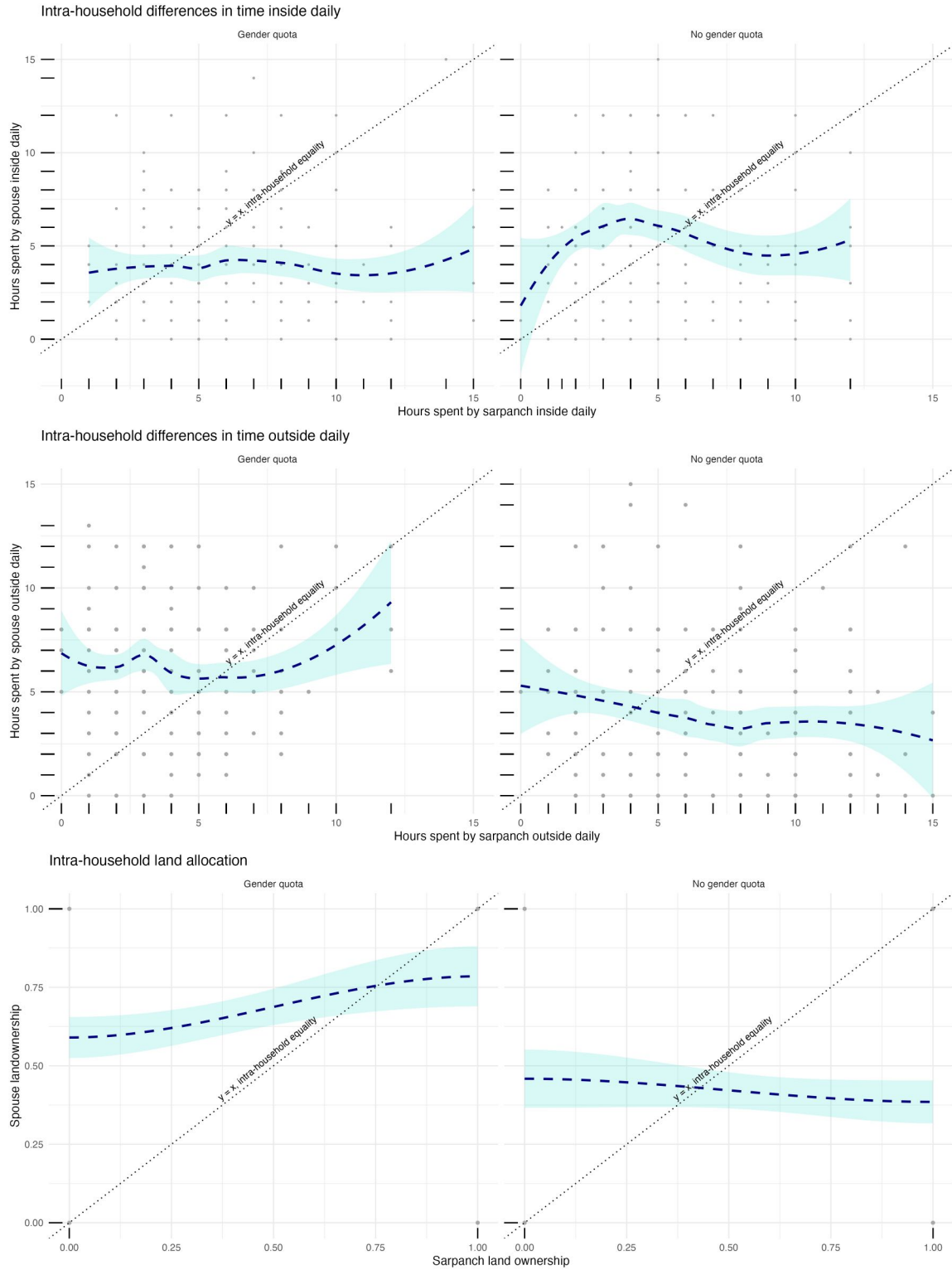
While Figure 1's top panel does indicate the traditional gendered division of intra-household labor we would expect in the absence of quotas (the upper right sextant), this division does not reverse in the presence of gender quotas (the upper left sextant). Instead, we see the majority of quota-elected women Sarpanches continuing to perform the majority of intra-household work (observations are clustered to the right of the dotted line of gender-equal intra-household time allocation) whereas most men allocate an extremely limited amount of time to intra-household work independent of the labor provided by women partners who are simultaneously navigating electoral duties. Indeed, Table 1 finds that quota-elected women spend significantly more time on intra-household labor than do non-quota elected (predominantly-male) officials. On average, quota-elected women spend an addi-

tional 3.4 hours on work within the home compared to their non-quota elected colleagues, significant at the 99.9 confidence interval (Table 1, Column 3).

Yet what about time allocated to public, political labor? Figure 1's middle panel plots the distribution between married, heterosexual partners utilizing the same form as the upper panel applied. In the absence of gender quotas, we again observe the traditional distribution of gendered time use in line with gendered labor roles: the majority of (predominantly-male) elected heads devote far more time to extra-household labor than do their women partners (middle left sextant).

In the presence of gender quotas we see a more complex distribution of time (and presumably power) to public labor (middle left panel of Figure 1). We observe a U-shaped curve in the spousal distribution of time devoted to public, extra-household labor. A substantial portion of men spouses do appear to 'capture' public-facing Sarpanch duties, acting as "proxy" representatives as critics of reservation implementation feared such that men non-elected spouses perform the majority of public labor (observations clustered to the left of the dotted line indicating gender-equal extra-household time use, around zero for the horizontal axis: no hours spent by the Sarpanch on extra-household work). Indeed, Table 1 shows quota-elected women allocate on average over five hours less on public, extra-household labor compared to their non-quota elected (predominantly male) colleagues, significant at the 99.9 percent confidence interval (Table 1, Column 2). However, we also observe a second set of cases, clustered to the right of the dotted line indicating gender-equal time use, where women *sarpanches* devote 6-12 hours daily to public work and their non-elected (men) partners take a secondary public role in line with democratic norms and expectations. This suggests gender quotas do have the potential to disrupt gendered dominance in public labor under the *right* conditions.

Figure 1: Quota-elected sarpanches face an intra-household bargaining disadvantage



Note: Graphics include bivariate plots with LOESS fit lines and standard error ribbons. Left panels among gender quota GPs, right panels among GPs without quotas.

Table 1: Intra-household patriarchal dominance prevails in quota sarpanch families

	Intra-HH bargaining power			Mobility	
	Land ownership gap	Outside time gap	Inside time gap	Sarpanch travels alone	Sarpanch can drive
(Non-quota mean)	0.236*** (0.040)	2.833*** (0.323)	-1.296*** (0.276)	0.858*** (0.020)	0.740*** (0.025)
Gender quota	-0.571*** (0.054)	-5.150*** (0.394)	3.403*** (0.382)	-0.294*** (0.035)	-0.518*** (0.035)
Num.Obs.	602	526	518	606	600
R2	0.158	0.248	0.133	0.106	0.268

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Each column corresponds to a regression of gender quota status on a different outcome. Robust standard errors included in parentheses. The fourth and fifth columns can be interpreted as differences in percentage points.

4.2.2 Distribution of Power within Families: Land Ownership & Mobility

Given the positive relationship between women’s political representation and access to legal rights to inherit property, as documented by [Brulé \(2020\)](#), we might expect the intra-household distribution of property rights to shift away from the patriarchal *status quo*, where less than ten percent of women in India are estimated to own land ([Varghese 2024](#)), towards gender-equal property ownership, a configuration known to improve women’s familial bargaining power and political engagement for quota-elected women ([Brulé 2020](#)). Instead, the lowest panel of Figure 1 shows a consistent pattern of male-biased land ownership among families of elected heads, independent of gender quotas. Men are more likely to own land than women partners, both in the absence of gender quotas—where predominantly-male elected representatives are more likely to own land (with more observations to the right of the dotted line indicating gender parity in land ownership, Figure 1 lower right sextant)—and in the presence of gender quotas (with more observations to the left of the dotted line marking gender parity). Table 1 reaffirms these patterns: quota-elected women are

57 percentage points less likely to own land than their non-quota elected, predominantly male colleagues, significant at the 99.9 confidence interval (Table 1, Col. 1).

Might gender quotas disrupt familial power by eroding patriarchal limitations on women's extra-household mobility? To answer this question, Table 1 additionally investigates gender gaps in mobility between spouses in families with quota- and non-quota elected *panchayat* heads. We measure mobility in two ways: first, as the self-reported ability of each married partner to travel alone, and second as their self-reported ability to drive, as driving a vehicle provides the most autonomous method of travel. Gender quotas do not eliminate patriarchal constraints on women's extra-familial mobility: quota-elected women *sarpanches* are 29 percentage points less likely to report they are able to travel alone, and 52 percentage points less likely to report they are able to drive than their predominantly male non-quota elected colleagues, significant at the 99.9 percent confidence level (Table 1, Col. 4-5).

4.2.3 Intra-familial Political Influence: Elected Officials & Married Partners

Given the differential bargaining power that likely accrues to non-quota elected men as compared to quota-elected women based on the male-biased allocation of not only time to extra-household, public political work, but also land ownership and opportunities for extra-household mobility, does this mean that gender quotas are unable to disrupt objective and subjective patterns of intra-household political influence?

Figure 2 identifies significant, objective presence of male, non-elected spouses where gender quotas mandate women are elected to govern. Male spouses are present across multiple rounds of individual interviews (14-19%) to joining development budget deliberations with elected and appointed officials (13%) and, in more limited cases, participating in these deliberations with quota-elected women *sarpanches* (3%; Figure 2, upper left quadrant). These objective behaviors align with reports by male spouses of their political influence: where women are elected via

gender quotas, their spouses are 46 percentage points more likely to report spending any time daily on political work for the *gram panchayat*; 24 percentage points more likely to report themselves as the most important decision-maker in the family on whether or not their spouse would run for elected office; 18 percentage points more likely to “always or frequently” attend bureaucratic meetings with elected spouses;⁸ and 14 percentage points more likely to report they—not their elected spouse—are considered the most important actor in the *gram panchayat* (Figure 2 lower right quadrant). Indeed, quota-elected women sarpanches are 15 percentage points more likely to identify their male, non-elected partner as the most important decision-maker in their family on *gram panchayat* (Figure 2, lower left quadrant).

While male partner reports of their own influence roughly align with objective, observed behavior, there is an important disjuncture between subjective perceptions of influence and several sets of observed, objective influence. First, male presence in the local *panchayat*-level budgetary deliberations we organized did *not* correlate with male political voice or influence, suggesting that women are able to leverage their access to the state—despite substantial constraints due to patriarchal norms—to influence the outcomes of political decision-making.

In addition, citizen perceptions suggest familial-level patterns of gendered dominance do not neatly translate into influence within village institutions. Specifically, Figure 2 finds that while citizens are 12 percentage points more likely to perceive the male spouses of quota-elected women (compared to the spouse of non-quota elected men) *sarpanches* to be the most important decision-maker within the *sarpanch* household, few citizens report that they perceive the male spouse to be most

⁸This figure roughly aligns with reports by the lead village-level bureaucrat, the *gram sevak*, about whether quota-elected women *sarpanches* work independently from family members. A quarter of all *gram sevaks* (24%, Figure 2 lower left quadrant) report that women, at least in their perception, do not work independently from their family members.

important decision-maker in either the elected village council; the gram sabha; or in the active work that the spouse as compared to the quota-elected woman *sarpanch* performs for the *gram panchayat*. In addition, these low levels of the influence that men, as the partners of elected *sarpanches*, are perceived to exert in village governance fit with observed levels of dominance by men partners of quota-elected women heads in group deliberations over *panchayat* budgets for development that we observed (4%, Figure 2 lower left quadrant). In sum, this suggests that while gender quotas are generally unable to reverse patterns of patriarchal dominance in families, this does not neatly translate into the dominance of non-elected husbands—or ‘*sarpanch patis*’—in *panchayat* governance.

Overall, these findings suggest that quota-elected women *sarpanches*, on average, remain subject to patriarchal constraints on their familial bargaining power which their predominantly male colleagues elected in the absence of quotas are able to evade. Quota-elected women are likely to spend significantly more time on intra-household labor, less time on the extra-household, public political labor that they are elected to perform, and to perform their labor with lower levels of material resources—measured as land ownership—and more limited mobility than men elected in the absence of quotas. While the more complex variation in public, extra-household time allocation, political voice, and village council engagement does not suggest the comprehensive dominance by non-elected men partners as “proxies” that critics of women’s reservations predicted and feared, it does suggest the “light touch” implementation of women’s reservations does not comprehensively disrupt patriarchal political dominance in families (Brulé, Chauchard and Heinze 2022).

Figure 2: Male family members disproportionate interference in quota-elected GPs



Note: Regressions of gender quota status on outcomes. Robust standard errors used to form 95 percent confidence intervals. Citizen perceptions clustered at GP-level.

4.3 Village-level institutions of dominance

Do gender quotas disrupt patriarchy in the work women spouses conduct with predominantly-male village elites, who can leverage their differential access to political parties, caste councils, and bureaucratic institutions? If not, male village-level elites are likely to leverage patriarchal hierarchy to circumnavigate control by democratically-elected panchayat leaders and their councils, limiting head's capacity to run *panchayats* as "institutions of self-government" and potentially consolidating their own influence in the process (Aiyar 2002, 3293).

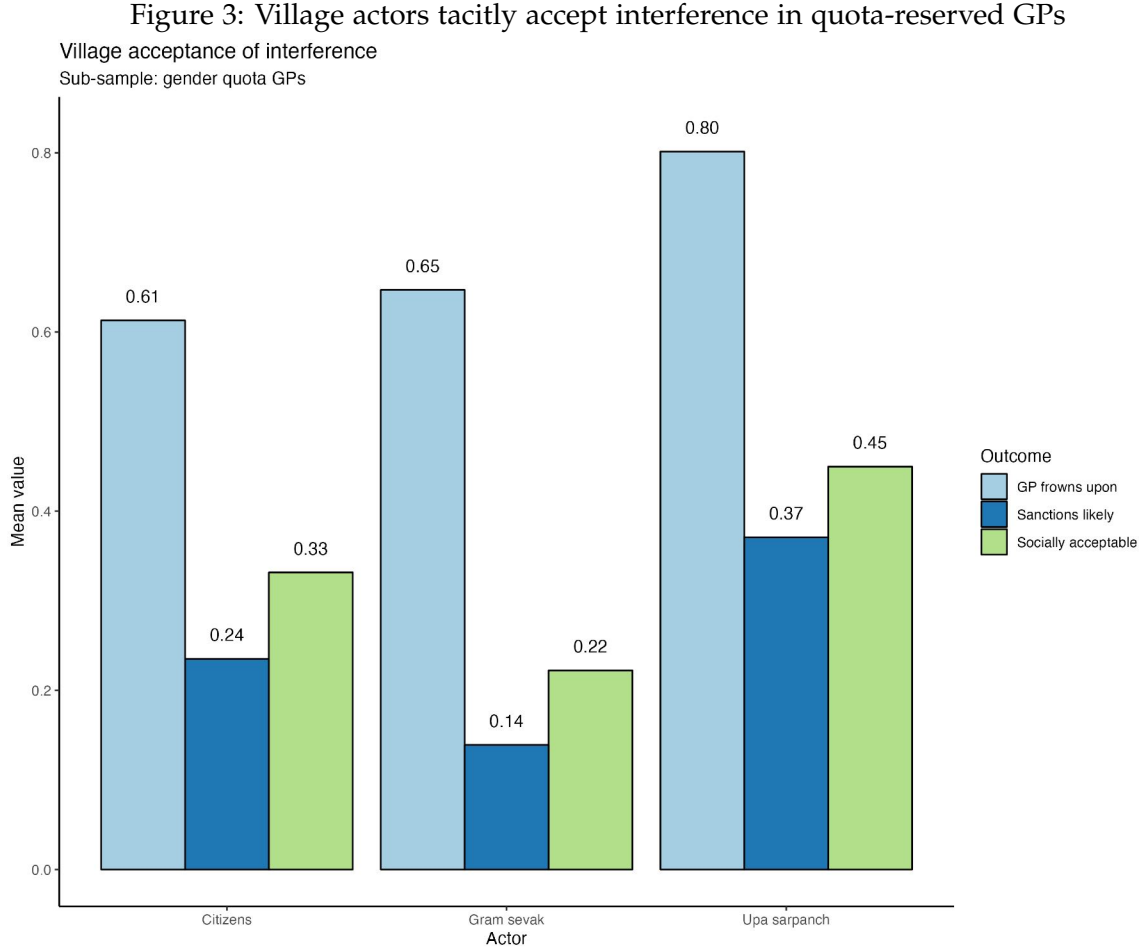
We first study whether gender quotas alter village-level patterns of dominance via investigating the perceived likelihood of either informal or formal sanctions against interference in the *sarpanch's* conduct of her work according to citizens, bureaucrats (*gram sevak*) and elected officials (the *upa sarpanch*, who is appointed as vice president of the *panchayat*). Specifically, we seek to identify whether or not women's political autonomy as elected heads translates into the capacity to get work done absent interference, based on three forms of enforcement: informal, by the community at large; informal, by the elected council members; and third, formal, by higher-level state officials. We next examine variation between quota-elected women *sarpanches* and the council member appointed as the second-in-command or vice president. This helps understand the relative power of each actor, as the *upa sarpanch* is often the highest status council member whom quotas displace to a secondary role in name, with incentives to capture the *sarpanch* function in practice. Finally, we consider perceptions of power dynamics within the *gram panchayat*, complemented by *sarpanch* reports of decision-making in an institution at the core of decision-making in the elected *gram panchayat*: the *masik sabha* or monthly meeting where decision-making over budget allocations and their disbursement occurs.

4.3.1 Village- and state-level governance norms

Where quotas apply, do village-level community norms support autonomous governance by quota-elected women *sarpanches*? To investigate, we ask about the social acceptability of interference within the village community as a whole, specifically: “Around here, is it socially acceptable for someone else to do the *sarpanch*’s work instead of the *sarpanch*? To the extent respondents answer negatively, this suggests informal enforcement of *sarpanch* autonomy according to sanctions imposed by the “court of public opinion.” Figure 3 maps, in green, responses by citizens, the lead village-level bureaucrat (*gram sevak*), and the *panchayat* vice president (*Upa sarpanch*). A substantial proportion of citizens—one third—consider interference acceptable, as do nearly half of all council vice presidents (45%). While only one fifth of bureaucrats (22%) agree that interference is “socially acceptable,” given such actors are the state’s designated actors for sharing information about and supporting enforcement of local laws—which prohibit such interference—this, coupled with the particularly high proportions of citizens and bureaucrats who consider interference socially acceptable suggests at best substantial negligence on their part and at worst complicity with undermining consensus in favor of quota-elected women’s autonomy.

Second, we investigate informal enforcement of autonomy within elected councils themselves. We query: “If other people do the work of the *sarpanch* (instead of the *sarpanch*), is it likely to be frowned upon by *panchayat* members?” Figure 3 maps, in light blue, responses by the three sets of actors described above. Notably, *gram panchayat* members appear both more aware of and willing to frown upon interference, with over 60% of citizens and bureaucrats expecting *gram panchayat* members to “frown upon” interference with the *sarpanch*’s work (61% and 65% respectively). Indeed, 80% of the vice presidents with the (social and economic) power to usurp the role of quota-elected *sarpanches* anticipate disapproval for such be-

havior by the *gram panchayat*. This suggests that village council norms are at least moderately tilted against any interference with the work of quota-elected *sarpanches*.



Note: Figure 3 shows the mean for each outcome question (proportion of “yes” responses), by actor, in *panchayats* with quota-elected women heads. N=297 *gram panchayats*.

Third and finally, we ask about formal enforcement of *sarpanch* autonomy by the state. Here, we ask: “If other people do the work of the *sarpanch* (instead of the *sarpanch*), is it likely that block or district level officials will sanction those individuals?” Figure 3 maps these responses in dark blue. Given that the state is directly charged with enforcement of its policy, we would anticipate the clearest consensus in favor of sanctions here. And yet, we see the reverse. While just over a third of *pan-*

chayat vice presidents estimate sanctions for interference by block- and district-level officials, the bureaucrats with the strongest relationships to these higher-level state actors anticipate far lower levels of state responsiveness—with just 14% anticipating state sanctions—and citizens concur (24% anticipate state sanctions).

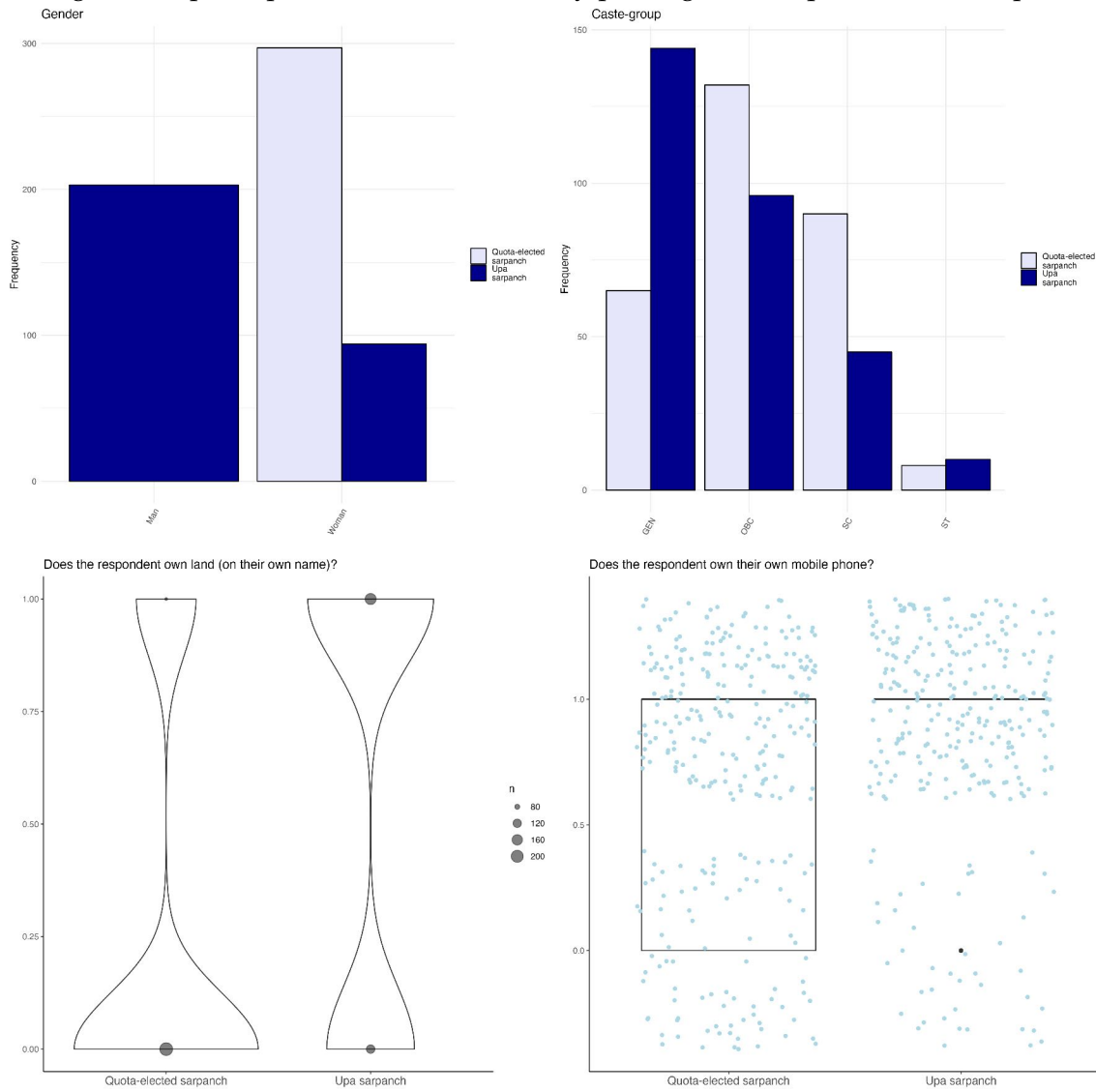
Overall, higher-level state officials and village-level society appear highly tolerant of interference in quota-elected *sarpanch* work. While members of elected councils themselves appear more willing to “frown upon” interference, it is notable that the state bodies responsible for sanctioning interference and supporting *sarpanch* autonomy—block- and district-level officials—appear to be minimally responsive.

4.3.2 Power distribution within village councils: *Upa Sarpanch vs. Sarpanch*

What can we learn from comparisons of quota-elected women *sarpanches* and the council member appointed to be their second-in-command: the vice president or *Upa sarpanch*? Here, we are interested in understanding the relative power of each actor, given the *upa sarpanch* is often expected to have differential social status and economic resources, with associated incentives to capture the *sarpanch* function in practice. How worried should we be about such outcomes?

Figure 4 maps four measures of social privilege—gender, caste, and ownership of either land or a mobile phone— across quota-elected council heads (*sarpanches*), in light blue, and the council member appointed to the second-most-powerful position (*upa sarpanch*), in dark blue. Considering gender as a substantial marker of social status, it is notable that the (*upa sarpanch*) is more than twice as likely to be a man (whereas all quota-elected *sarpanches* are women; Figure 4 upper left quadrant).

Figure 4: Upa sarpanches are more socially privileged than quota-elected sarpanches



Note: Figure presents variable distributions by respondent identity (upa sarpanch or sarpanch), within *gram panchayats* with quota-elected women *sarpanches*. $N = 297$ GPs.

Regarding caste, Figure 4 shows a similar if not greater gap in social status: the (*upa sarpanch*) is over twice as likely to be from the most privileged “general” caste category than the quota-elected (*sarpanch*), and less than half as likely than the quota-elected sarpanch to be a member of an highly-stigmatized Scheduled Caste (formerly known as “untouchables”; Figure 4 upper right quadrant). Regarding land

ownership, as the most valuable measure of wealth in rural India, again the *Upa sarpanch* is over twice as likely to own land compared to the quota-elected *sarpanch* (Figure 4 lower left quadrant). Mobile phone ownership also suggests meaningful economic status differences: whereas a critical mass of *Upa sarpanches* own a mobile phone, close to half of quota-elected *sarpanches* do not own any mobile phone (Figure 4 lower right quadrant).

Yet do these gaps in social and economic status between appointed *Upa sarpanches* and quota-elected *sarpanches* translate into dominance by *Upa sarpanches* within village council deliberations? Table 2 investigates this question, comparing the likelihood that the *Upa sarpanch* is considered more influential and/or active than the *sarpanch* in subjective and objective measures of intra-council influence for those *sarpanches* elected in the presence versus the absence of gender quotas. To measure dominance, we draw from two instruments: our orchestrated group discussion survey (columns 1, 3, and 4) and our citizen survey (column 2), which are both described in Appendix A.

Table 2 shows a consistent pattern of both greater subjective and objective dominance by appointed *Upa sarpanches* in the presence of quota-elected women *sarpanches* as compared to (predominantly male) *sarpanches* elected in the absence of quotas. The existence of (randomly-assigned) quotas predict significantly more active *Upa sarpanch* in the village council's regular (bi-annual) convening of all adult citizens, the *gram sabha* (our one measure based on general behavior rather than derived from our meeting), as well as dominance by the *Upa sarpanch* over budgetary deliberations, both in terms of the proportion of time spoken by the *Upa sarpanch* and the specific gap between the time spoken by the *Upa sarpanch* versus the *sarpanch* (Table 2, Columns 2-4, respectively). All these relationships are significant at the 99.9% confidence interval. We also see a positive, albeit weaker, relationship between

Table 2: Upa sarpanch dominance in gender quota councils

	Upa sarpanch perceived as most influential in discussion	Upa sarpanch more active than sarpanch in gram sabha	Upa sarpanch's proportion spoken in the discussion	Upa sarpanch-Sarpanch proportion spoken (speaking gap)
(Non-quota mean)	0.137*** (0.019)	0.098*** (0.009)	0.228*** (0.007)	-0.108*** (0.013)
Gender quota	0.055+ (0.030)	0.066*** (0.016)	0.038*** (0.011)	0.161*** (0.018)
Num.Obs.	611	3102	610	609
R2	0.006	0.010	0.021	0.116

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Each column corresponds to a regression of gender quota status on a different outcome. Robust standard errors included in parentheses. The first, second, and third columns can be interpreted as differences in percentage points.

gender quotas and the subjective perception of the *Upa sarpanch* as most influential in budgetary deliberations (Table 2 Col. 1, significant at the 90% confidence interval).

Overall, we find that quota-elected women *sarpanches* have significantly lower social and economic status than the non-quota elected council member appointed to be their second-in-command: the vice president or *Upa sarpanch*. Table 2 indicates that these status differences do map onto dominance within *panchayat* deliberations, with quotas for women *sarpanches* predicting more active *Upa sarpanches* in public *panchayat* work as well as in private deliberations over budgets for village development. Thus, the potential for capture of quota-elected *sarpanch* roles by non-elected vice presidents seems quite high.

4.3.3 Power in core village decision-making: monthly *masik sabha* meetings

What about reports of objective behavior within the meetings at the core of village-level governance: monthly *masik sabha* meetings where key village council members convene to make decisions about budget allocations and their distribution? Given the structure of these meetings, which occur frequently, in private, with the key

decision-makers in the elected council complemented by the lead village bureaucrat (*gram sevak*) the *masik sabha* is one particularly promising institution to reshape patriarchal forms of village political power in the presence of quota-elected women *sarpanches* who one might expect to benefit substantially from close collaboration with experts who can share knowledge on how to navigate government bureaucracy such as the *gram sevak*. To investigate this, we consider the impact of gender quotas regarding *sarpanch*'s self-reported extent of their attendance and engagement in monthly *masik sabha* meetings alongside objective measures of *sarpanch* engagement and influence in the approximation of a *masik sabha* meeting that we convened.

Considering *masik sabha* attendance, Figure 5 reports *sarpanches* report that most women elected council members attend these meetings where core decision-making over village budgets takes place (left panel). However, approximately half of *sarpanches* estimate that "most" or "almost everyone" of the elected women "just sign the attendance sheet and leave" (Figure 5, right panel). This suggests that in roughly half of 611 *gram panchayats* in Maharashtra that we surveyed, women's engagement in this institution responsible for core decision-making in local governance is purely superficial, existing on paper only. With this in mind, it should not be surprising that nearly half of all quota-elected women *sarpanches* report that their male spouse attends the *masik sabha* (in Figure 2 lower left quadrant).

We overcome the challenges of quota-elected women's frequently-limited attendance by convening a meeting that mirrors the *masik sabha*, bringing together the three most central decision-makers: *sarpanch*, *upa sarpanch* and *gram sevak*. Within this meeting where by design all quota- elected and non quota-elected *sarpanches* are present, we can observe the extent and impact of quota-elected women's voices as compared to those of non-quota elected, predominantly male *sarpanches*. As Table 3 displays, we find that quota-elected women *sarpanches* speak for a significantly

smaller proportion of the *masik sabha*, a third less time than non-quota elected (primarily men) *sarpanches* (Table 3, Col 1), with lead bureaucrats speaking for significantly greater portions of the time in these meetings (three times more than in meetings with non quota-elected *sarpanches*), (Table 3 Col 3). Indeed, quota-elected women *sarpanches* are significantly less likely to take the final budget decision and to be assessed as the most influential actor in the budgetary decision-making discussion than are non-quota elected (men) *sarpanches* (Table 3, Col 5-6).

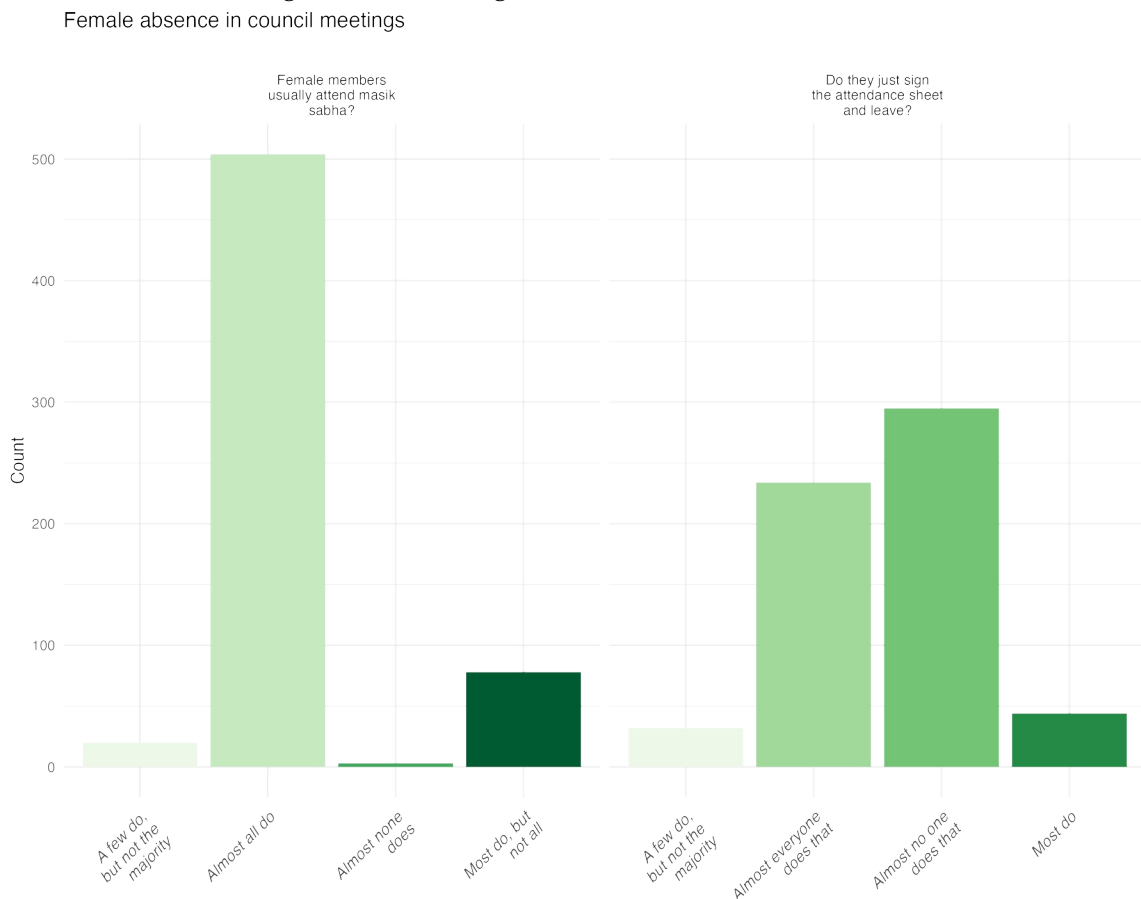
Overall, both *sarpanch* reports and independent observations suggest that gender quotas do not decisively reverse patriarchal dominance within the core institution for village-level decision-making regarding the size, composition, and allocation of budgets for local development: the monthly *masik sabha* meeting. Yet, neither do these village-level institutions completely exclude quota-elected women from in village-level governance: as many of half of *sarpanches* report that women's participation in the *masik sabha* is *not* simply on paper, and we observe substantial proportions of quota-elected *sarpanches* presiding over decision-making processes, both in taking the final decision about budget allocation and being assessed as the most influential official in the decision-making process.

Table 3: Exclusionary masak sabhas when quota-elected women preside

	Proportion of discussion sarpanch spoke	Proportion of discussion others spoke	Gram sevak-sarpanch speaking gap (proportion)	All others-sarpanch speaking gap (proportion)	Sarpanch took the final budget decision	Sarpanch most influential in the discussion
(Non-quota mean)	0.338***	0.664***	0.067***	0.327***	0.385***	0.357***
Gender quota	(0.009) -0.124*** (0.012)	(0.009) 0.124*** (0.012)	(0.015) 0.185*** (0.021)	(0.017) 0.246*** (0.023)	(0.028) -0.224*** (0.035)	(0.027) -0.252*** (0.032)
Num.Obs.	610	609	609	608	611	611
R2	0.157	0.156	0.117	0.155	0.062	0.089

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Figure 5: Broader gendered absence in masak sabhas



Note: Figure presents mean responses to two questions asked to the sarpanch, among all gram panchayats, $N = 611$ GPs.

4.4 Patriarchal bureaucracy

Our final investigation into the impact of women's reservations on local dominance concerns a set of state-run institutions which are both pivotal to the function of local government and potentially the most problematic, alternative centers of patriarchal power: the bureaucracy. The presumption that the power of centrally-appointed bureaucrats might "get in the way" of initiatives proposed by democratically-elected local representatives—advanced by Rajiv Gandhi as a reason to shift power from bureaucrats to local politicians—certainly was colored by the political incentives of party leaders (Singer 2007, 101). However, these strategic decisions, coupled with the limited devolution of powers to *panchayats*—which at worst confined their main work to implementing existing, centrally-funded rural development programmes—meant that local bureaucrats retain discretion crucial for the functioning both of *panchayat* work as well as local governance more broadly (Jayal 2006, 26).

Additionally, the status, expertise, and direct influence of predominantly male, elite bureaucrats selected and appointed through highly competitive, merit-based recruitment processes—coupled with their well-established male bias (Purohit 2024)—makes them potentially the most effective nodes for preserving elite male dominance in opposition to the power that reservations intend women *sarpanches* to wield as democratically-elected heads of local government.

To study the impact of gender quotas in disrupting patriarchal bureaucratic dominance, we first consider the distribution of social, economic, and educational characteristics which can reinforce or undermine such dominance. Here, we compare *gram sevaks* and quota-elected women *sarpanches* in the subset of *gram panchayats* with gender quotas for the *sarpanch*. We then assess the dominance of the *gram sevak* relative to that of the *sarpanch*, comparing quota versus non-quota elected *sarpanches* through a combination of citizen perceptions, self-reported, and observed behavior.

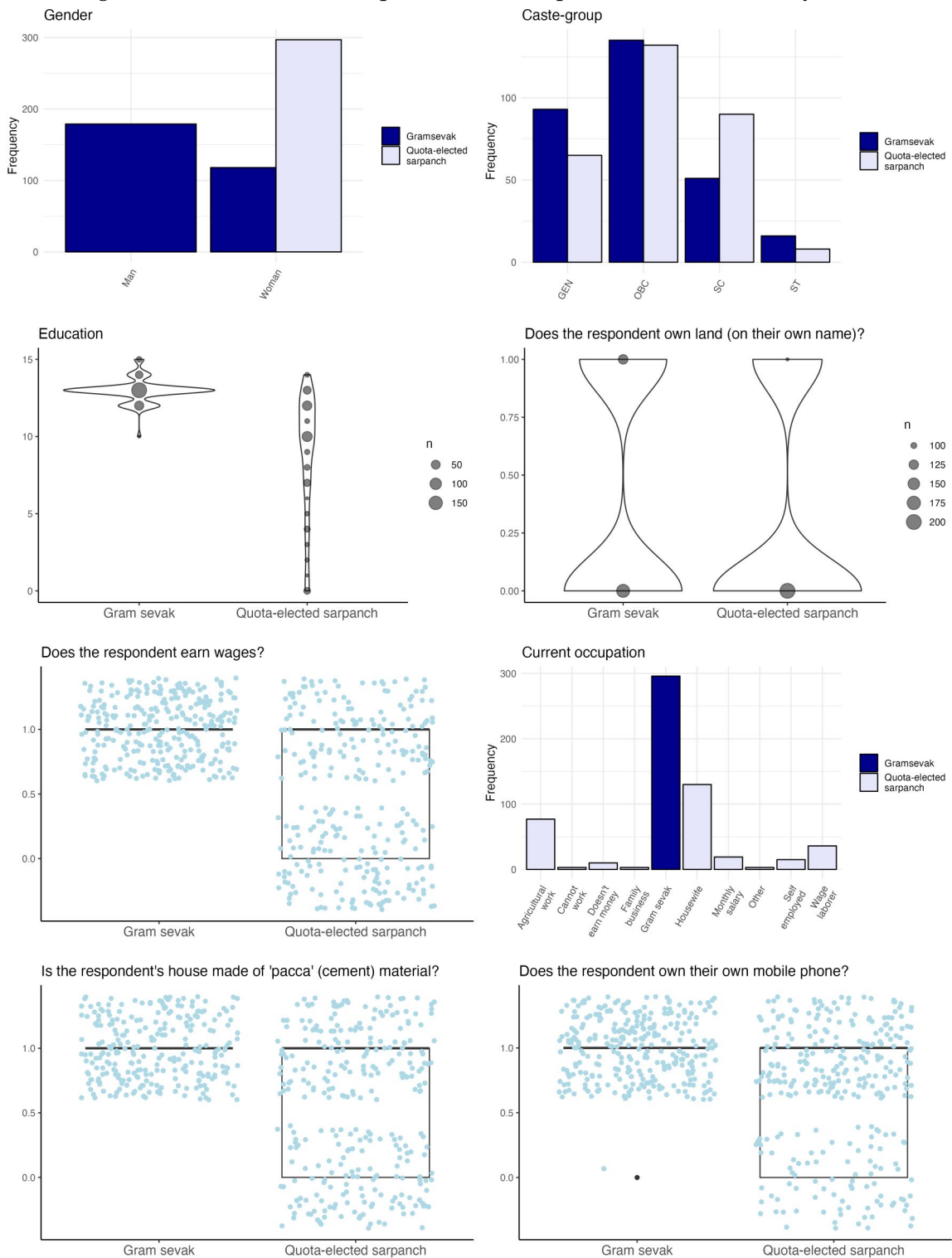
4.4.1 Power distribution between bureaucrat (*gram sevak*) & Sarpanch

To what extent are the government's predominantly-male lead bureaucrats able to leverage advantages in social, economic, and educational status differentially over quota-elected *sarpanches* that might translate into patriarchal bureaucratic dominance? To answer, Figure 6 maps eight measures of social privilege: gender, caste, education, land ownership, wages and the nature of their occupation, house quality, and mobile phone ownership, across quota-elected council heads (*sarpanches*), in light blue, and the lead bureaucrat (*gram sevak*), in dark blue. Table 4 provides the distribution of means, summarized by actor.

On gender, while Maharashtra is working to implement gender quotas for these bureaucrats, we still observe that the majority of *gram sevaks* in our sample are male (60%, compared to the exclusively-women quota-elected *sarpanches*). In comparison to *gram sevaks*, quota-elected women *sarpanches* are nearly twice as likely to be members of traditionally-marginalized Scheduled Castes (17% versus 31% respectively) and less likely to be members of a privileged "general" caste than *gram sevaks* (32% versus 22%, respectively, Table 4). In addition, *gram sevaks* have on average 5 additional years of education, are twice as likely to earn wages and have a high-quality "pacca" or finished home, and are more likely to own land and mobile phones than quota-elected *sarpanches* (Figure 6, Table 4).

Overall, the divergence in access to social, economic, and educational resources between *gram sevaks* and quota-elected *sarpanches* are broad enough to suggest these actors are drawn from completely different population distributions. *Gram sevaks* accrue immensely more privilege across domains than quota-elected *sarpanches*. In this context, bureaucrats "enjoying the advantages of education, permanent tenure, administrative experience and mastery over procedures," are particularly likely "to dominate elected representatives" in the presence of gender quotas (Jayal 2006, 27).

Figure 6: Gram sevaks and quota-elected sarpanches look drastically different



Note: Graphics include variable distributions by respondent identity (gram sevak or quota-elected sarpanch). Sample limited to GPs where sarpanches are elected via gender quota. $N = 297$ GPs.

Table 4: Gram sevak have much more social privilege than quota-elected sarpanches

Outcome	Actor	Min	Mean	SD
Gender	Gram sevak	0	0.397	0.490
	Quota-elected sarpanch	1	1.000	0.000
SC	Gram sevak	0	0.172	0.378
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	0.305	0.461
GEN	Gram sevak	0	0.316	0.466
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	0.220	0.415
Education	Gram sevak	10	12.963	0.755
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	8.818	3.947
Owns mobile	Gram sevak	0	0.997	0.058
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	0.704	0.457
Earns wages	Gram sevak	1	1.000	0.000
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	0.507	0.501
Owns land	Gram sevak	0	0.426	0.495
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	0.319	0.467
Has pacca house	Gram sevak	1	1.000	0.000
	Quota-elected sarpanch	0	0.552	0.498

Note: Numbers include variable summaries by respondent identity (gram sevak or quota-elected sarpanch). Sample limited to GPs where sarpanches are elected via gender quota. $N = 297$ GPs.

4.4.2 Bureaucratic dominance in council decision-making

Does the divergence in the expertise as well as social and economic resources that *gram sevaks* versus quota-elected *sarpanches* possess translate into distinctive patriarchal bureaucratic dominance where *sarpanches* are elected in the presence (versus absence) of gender quotas? Table 5 investigates this question in contemporary rural Maharashtra by first examining citizen perceptions then considering behavioral measures of dominance. Citizens widely consider *gram sevaks* to be more active than the *sarpanch* in the village-level convening of all adult citizens to advance governance—the *gram sabha*—even absent gender quotas (Table 5, Col 1). However, in the presence of gender quotas, citizens are about 25 percent more likely to consider the *gram sevak* as more active than the quota-elected woman *sarpanch* ($p < 0.05$, Table 5, Col 1). We see a similar, albeit stronger relationship regarding the *gram sevak*'s perceived higher level of activity in the village council (*gram panchayat*), which exists in the absence of quotas but is magnified in the presence of quotas ($p < 0.001$, Table 5, Col 2).

What about dominance in the observed behavior of bureaucrats? Financial control is arguably the most important measure of bureaucratic dominance. In particular, the *Sarpanch*, as the elected village head is by law required to hold the checkbook used to disburse financial resources on behalf of the village. Yet, in the absence of gender quotas we see that the *gram sevak* is nearly forty percentage points more likely than the *sarpanch* to hold the check book ($p < 0.001$, Table 5, Col 3). Strikingly, *gram sevaks* are ten percentage points *less* likely to hold the village checkbook where quota-elected women *sarpanches* hold power ($p < 0.01$, Table 5, Col 3). Given that book-keeping is the central focus of most government training of women in both elected government and one of the main pipelines to representation—women's Self Help Groups—this disruption of patriarchal bureaucratic power suggests that state-led capacity building work for quota-elected women may indeed improve gover-

nance, not merely enabling women to “catch up” to male representatives but rather to drive further advancements in governance writ large (Aiyar 2002).

Finally, we consistently observe *gram sevaks* dominating in the *masik sabha* deliberations over budgetary allocations for local development that we organized. Not only are *gram sevaks* more likely to respond first to questions asking all officials about their development priorities for the village, they are more likely to be assessed by our independent, gender-balanced team of coders as taking the final decision over how to allocate the budget, and as the most influential actor in budgetary decision-making (Table 5, Col 4, 6, 8). These relationships all hold in the absence of gender quotas, with *gram sevak* dominance over decision-making further reinforced in the presence of gender quotas ($p < 0.05$). When we investigate whether women *gram sevaks* disrupt the broader pattern of patriarchal bureaucratic dominance that we observe, in Panel 2 of Table 5, we find no evidence that gendered bureaucratic representation disrupts bureaucratic dominance, either in general or specifically in the presence of gender quotas for elected *sarpanches*.

Overall, we conclude that *gram sevaks*—with educational, economic, and social advantages they can via their discretionary financial and political power as the state’s lead agent for development—consistently exert dominance over local elected heads of government (*sarpanches*) even in the absence of gender quotas. In the presence of gender quotas, the patriarchal bureaucratic state’s dominance is magnified, regardless of bureaucrat gender. There is one notable exception: quota-elected women *sarpanches* are ten percentage points *more* likely to retain financial power, by possessing the *gram panchayat* checkbook as required, in comparison to non-quota elected *sarpanches* ($p < 0.01$, Table 5, Col 3). Given that book-keeping is the central focus of most government capacity-building programs for women, this suggests state action may be able to disrupt bureaucratic dominance and advance local governance.

Table 5: Gram sevak dominance in gender quota councils

<i>The gram sevak (is)...</i>	Outcomes: Perceptions				Outcomes: Behaviors				
	More ac- tive than S in gram sabha	More ac- tive than S in GP	Possesses GP check- book	Responded first to village question	Responded to first to S respon- sibilities question	Took final budget decision	GS-S speak- ing gap	Most influ- ential	
<i>Panel A: Impact of gender quotas</i>									
(Intercept)	0.221*** (0.013)	0.207*** (0.012)	0.382*** (0.029)	0.408*** (0.028)	0.073*** (0.015)	0.299*** (0.026)	0.067*** (0.015)	0.401*** (0.028)	
Gender quota	0.043* (0.019)	0.072*** (0.019)	-0.103* (0.040)	0.111** (0.040)	0.051* (0.024)	0.159*** (0.039)	0.185*** (0.021)	0.161*** (0.040)	
R2	0.003	0.007	0.012	0.012	0.007	0.027	0.117	0.026	
<i>Panel B: Heterogeneity by gram sevak gender</i>									
(Intercept)	0.210*** (0.017)	0.206*** (0.016)	0.357*** (0.039)	0.443*** (0.038)	0.092*** (0.022)	0.328*** (0.036)	0.079*** (0.021)	0.408*** (0.037)	
Gender quota	0.057* (0.024)	0.072** (0.024)	-0.124* (0.051)	0.088+ (0.053)	0.037 (0.033)	0.158** (0.052)	0.189*** (0.028)	0.195*** (0.052)	
Female GS	0.024 (0.026)	0.001 (0.024)	0.056 (0.059)	-0.078 (0.056)	-0.042 (0.029)	-0.063 (0.052)	-0.026 (0.029)	-0.015 (0.056)	
Gender quota * Female GS	-0.032 (0.039)	-0.001 (0.038)	0.059 (0.082)	0.048 (0.081)	0.032 (0.048)	-0.007 (0.078)	-0.015 (0.041)	-0.088 (0.081)	
Num.Obs.	3084	3509	551	611	611	611	609	611	
R2	0.003	0.007	0.021	0.016	0.010	0.031	0.120	0.031	

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Note: Robust standard errors included for all regressions. Perceptions-based outcomes are from citizen survey and are clustered at GP level. GS is short for gram sevak, and S is short for sarpanch. All coefficients can be interpreted as differences in percentage points.

5 Discussion

What explains the paradoxes of gendered power in contemporary India, where radical gender inclusion in elected local government leadership contrasts with gendered exclusion in village governance, families, and bureaucracies? To answer, we study the origins, strategic design, and impact of one national reform that opened the state to women: the 1993 Constitutional Amendments that mandated quotas or “reservations” for women as heads of local elected councils (*panchayats*).

On one hand, male élites publicized two motives for reform: advancing development and rewarding pivotal women voters (and groups) (Singer 2007; Menon 2000, 3836). On the other hand, we argue that orthogonal strategic motives likely drove reforms, specifically the aim to consolidate and reinforce elite, upper-caste and class male power. Concerns about power consolidation were relevant for several actors: male party élites, both in the dominant party who initially proposed women’s reservations, the coalition of opposition parties who subsequently expanded the scope of caste-based reservations (as recommended by the Mandal Commission), and the subsequent coalition of élite, predominantly-upper caste male legislators who stood to benefit from retaining control of the state. Given the substantial decline of élite, upper caste male representation across the entirety of representative government that Jaffrelot (2003) documents upon implementation of the Mandal Commission’s recommended caste reservations, it is plausible that legislators may have sought a tool for retaining and consolidating élite dominance in the local state. Reservations for women in *panchayats* might serve this purpose given the presumed continuity of “feudal and patriarchal” hierarchies in the machinery of local governance (Buch 2004, 121). If so, reservations may have been motivated as an “upper caste ploy to stem the rising tide of lower caste men in politics” (Panda 2001, 692).

Yet whether or not women’s reservations supported or disrupted male elites’

retention of patriarchal dominance is an empirical question. Thirty years after reservations' national legislation, we analyze data that we collected from 610 villages or *gram panchayats* across rural Maharashtra. These data in sum show that 30 years of reservations in villages did not erase gender hierarchy in local governance. Women still face severe disadvantages and even hurdles or interference *after they reach office*. This occurs in three sites: within their family, in their interactions with other elites at the village level, and in their relationship with village bureaucrats. These hurdles likely prevent quota-elected women from having the transformative developmental and political impact they could have—as examples such as the all-women's *panchayat* panels elected across rural Maharashtra in the 1980s and 1990s indicate—and hence from transforming the stated intentions of the male elites who agreed, in 1993, to this system of quotas into reality (Omvedt 1990; Gala 1997; Datta 2000).

While attributing the inability of large-scale reservations to comprehensively disrupt patriarchal dominance in village politics to the presence of regressive social norms is both tempting and common in contemporary India, we argue that this disappointing outcome instead owes much to the specifics of the design of reservations, driven by the existence of regressive ulterior motives advanced by politicians with profound influence over the design and implementation of legislation. These strategic motives to advance electoral and identity-related power, we contend, led to both negligence in the implementation of the Act and sabotage of the transformative potential of women's large-scale presence in elected office.

It is of course impossible to know what the situation would have looked like 30 years down the line, in the absence of the loopholes that we argue were directly motivated by strategic efforts to bound women's political power and capacity to advance cross-caste, class- and community coalitions as a means to consolidating elite, upper caste male control. Specifically, had male elite legislators chosen to enact

women's reservations without their rotation every election, to limit the discretion of states to limit their devolution of financial power, or to circumscribe the ability of states to engineer further institutional hurdles for elected women such as by limiting the number of women mandated to sit in office at any point in time, women's reservations may have translated into more fundamental shifts in power and the nature of local governance. Because we can trace how deliberate design decisions led to predictable outcomes (and in fact, outcomes that women's organizations predicted would occur under such design), we see many reasons to believe, however, that the results of this radical reform could have been far more expansive, and that the male elites who maintained the upper hand in both the form and the timing of these reform's legislation bear a direct responsibility for the constrained impact of reservations that we observe in contemporary India.

As we close our investigation, one major caveat is however in order: that reservations did not live up to their full potential due to the way in which they were designed does *not* imply that women's reservations—as a path to women's substantive representation—are by definition impossible to realize, and even less so does it imply that women would be better off in reservations absence, however constraining their current form might be. Much to the contrary, we assert that these reservations, and the contested process of mandating women's political representation that led to them *also* opened up possibilities and spaces that did not exist before.

Many positive examples of women's mobilization in ways that disrupt power exist throughout the course of the Constitutional Amendment's legislation. Take the example of one experiment with women's political representation in Vitner, which [Omvedt \(1990, 1689\)](#) describes as “a small, remote village on the banks of the Tapi” in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra. Vitner's community is comprised predominantly of members of the gujar *jati* (subcaste), here mainly poor peasants, who decided to

elect an all-women's panel with a backward caste *koli* woman, Shubhabai Raisingh, as *sarpanch*, with equal representation of *gujar* and *koli jatis* along with a dalit representative. Upon taking political power, women moved to implement real economic power. Here, Vitner women and men went farther than a proposed Shetkari Mahila Aghadi resolution from a November 1989 conference recommending men transfer part of their income to women relatives. Instead, they agreed that men would transfer the legal property rights to women—the *sat-baras*—with between half-an-acre and seven acres given to each woman in 127 village families. Transfers excluded large landholders, whose acts could be seen as evading land ceilings (Omvedt 1990, 1689).

While Vitner is a widely-lauded case, systemic analysis has found that the broader shifts in power which accompany all-women elected panels in Maharashtra's villages occur across India where quotas bring women from marginalized castes and tribes to power, catalyzing substantial action to advance collective interests, particularly for members of marginalized castes (Omvedt 1990; Datta 2000; Brulé and Tóth 2024). Women's political representation thus extends beyond symbolic, superficial, political strategy by male élites to enable meaningful change for all citizens.

In addition, as highlighted in our empirical analyses, sustained exposure to these reforms has altered, in nuanced ways, longstanding patterns of patriarchal and caste dominance (Beaman et al. 2009; Chauchard 2017; Parthasarathy, Rao and Palaniswamy 2019; Brulé 2020; Heinze, Brulé and Chauchard Forthcoming). First, a significant number of women *sarpanch* elected via quotas are actively reshaping the intra-household political division of labor, via spending more time outside of the household doing political work than their male spouses. Second, and relatedly, our data show clearly that in practice, male spouses are *not* merely using their wives as political "proxies" – contrary to what their self-perceptions and mainstream media may suggest. Third, while intra-village dominance does preclude

many quota-elected women from effectively presiding over the council, important variation exists. In some circumstances, quota-elected women are presiding over decision-making processes and being perceived as influential in these processes. Finally, in the face of an overwhelmingly elite and patriarchal bureaucracy, quota-elected women are rupturing patterns of bureaucratic fiscal domination, albeit in nuanced, micro-level ways such as by ensuring they hold the village checkbook.

We conclude that the multiplicity of motives driving women's reservations led to what we characterize overall as a paradoxical outcome. While the male élites designing and legislating Constitutional reform were by and large successful in achieving what we argue was the ulterior, strategic motive of reform—consolidation of their control—their success was not uniform. Instead, in line with the publicly stated goals of reservations—to build a more gender-inclusive, developmentally-successful local state, we see women representatives elected via reform disrupting gendered power in some domains of familial, village, and bureaucratic state control.

We thus consider the case of women's reservations in India as indicative of a much broader class of global behavior within the domain which [Faguet and Shami \(2022\)](#) theorize as “instrumental incoherence”: the simultaneous rise of radical, inclusive democratic reforms—including women's quotas as [Clayton \(2021\)](#) documents—and the retrenchment of increasingly-unconstrained élites advancing what [Riedl et al. \(2020\)](#) identify as “authoritarian-led democratization.” Where seemingly-inclusive reforms are harnessed to achieve short-term objectives of maintaining or consolidating élite power, we anticipate that élite dominance will likely be maintained in the short-term, but this does not preclude the harnessing of inclusive policy for long-term disruption of political, social, and economic dominance.

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