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Ulrike Mueller

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# LOST IN REPRESENTATION? FEMINIST IDENTITY ECONOMICS AND WOMEN'S AGENCY IN INDIA'S LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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Ulrike Mueller

## ABSTRACT

In India, since 1992, quotas for women in local councils are a key policy mechanism to secure gender equality in political participation and foster rural development. Affirmative action measures were expected to particularly enhance women's agency regarding decisions on decentralized service delivery. However, to date, this potentially transformative reform to the local government system has produced mixed results. This study updates identity economics with intersectional and institutional theories to shed light on the agency of elected women representatives (EWRs) in different federal states of India. The findings show that institutions, including social norms, entail specific identity costs that reinforce stereotyped accounts on women's political agency. Additional policy measures are required to address the incurred costs and render quotas for women effective. The analysis illustrates that an identity economics perspective, grounded in feminist thought, can yield valuable insights for investigating women's agency and for designing gender-sensitive policies.

## KEYWORDS

Affirmative action, agency, gender analysis, institutional analysis, intersectionality, development

JEL Codes: D01, H11, R58

## INTRODUCTION

The adoption of gender quotas is often justified with reference to Anne Phillips' (1995) well-known argument that a *politics of ideas* (political choice between policies and programs),<sup>1</sup> does not ensure sufficient concern for groups that are marginalized or excluded. Instead, the importance of a *politics of presence* (political choice on the basis of group interests), in which women are guaranteed fair representation in political institutions, is highlighted. The comprehension of a politics of presence implies that it does not only matter *what* is represented but *who* is a representative. Supporters of affirmative action policies argue that women government

representatives are able to better reflect the preferences of constituents in general and women citizens in particular (Esther Duflo 2005). Moreover, it is assumed that women politicians would adopt a different approach in managing public resources, leading, for instance, to less corruption. Hence, gender quotas are expected to improve both the content and quality of politics (Neema Kudva and Kajri Misra 2008).

Women's representation in political institutions through reserved seats is based on sexual difference. In fact, an undifferentiated category of women is the strongest basis for a claim to be represented (Jane Mansbridge 1999). However, given that the roles and responsibilities of women and men are situated in institutional contexts that are characterized by social heterogeneity, this conceptualization sacrifices an understanding of gender as a diverse category.

India is probably the country with the greatest internal diversity and plurality, so it does not appear adequate to consider the situation of women in a generalized manner (Martha C. Nussbaum 2002). With the adoption of decentralization reforms in 1992, gender quotas were introduced in India's local government system in order to bring decision making on service provision closer to end users and to enhance socioeconomic development in rural regions. The fact that a uniform political institution with essentialist assertions of gender identity is being implemented in a setting where women are marked by multiple differences makes India a case of particular interest.

Against this background, the study investigates the effects of India's quota policy on women's political agency in different institutional settings. Although both rational choice perspectives and approaches grounded in interpretive sociology appear to be incomplete, they have the potential to complement each other (John A. Ferejohn 1991). Following the plea for an integrative and feminist research approach (Paula England and Nancy Folbre 2005), I combine insights from economics and sociology with the goal to "move beyond the stultifying biases of both disciplines" (Julie A. Nelson 2010: 1147).

Drawing on a feminist identity economics framework, which conceptualizes gender as an intersectional structure, the study yields new understandings about constraints that make gender quotas in India less successful. The analysis indicates that context-specific institutions lead to differently perceived identity costs linked to women's agency. In addition, I present institutional innovations that can translate gender quotas effectively into practice and hence have the potential to increase the voice of elected women representatives (EWRs).

The study also argues that considering identity in economic analysis must go beyond a static conceptualization of identity-as-payoff. Psychologists and sociologists have repeatedly highlighted that identities are far from fixed. This is imperative in order to obtain a nuanced understanding about the

effectiveness of public policy and to advance the broader goal of making economic research more realistic.

### POLICY CONTEXT

Gender quotas in India existed first under British rule, when several groups with minority status were granted seats in legislatures based on the Government of India Act of 1935. Later on, however, the nationalist movement considered gender quotas as a “divide-and rule” strategy that would put the common identity of all Indians at risk. After Indian independence, the newly drafted constitution did not therefore make any provisions for women’s reservations (Mona Lena Krook 2010).

Although several government documents highlighted the importance of women’s representation in local politics, the debate was only seriously taken up in the 1970s, when the Government of India formed the “Committee on the Status of Women.” The committee proposed measures for improving the rights and opportunities of women, including a 30 percent quota for women in local governments. However, as there were considerable conflicts of opinion over the issue, women’s reservations were finally not recommended by the committee’s report (Mala Htun 2004). Interestingly, the committee legitimized the rejection of gender quotas with the argument that women constituted a “category,” while caste- or religion-based minority groups were to be conceived of as “communities”: “there can be no rational basis for reservations for women . . . Though they have some real problems of their own, they share with men the problems of their groups, locality and community” (Government of India 1974, cited in Htun 2004: 448).

The discussion on reservations for women reemerged in 1989, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi submitted the 64th Amendment Bill, which advocated women’s political participation in the *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (local self-governments). After the Bill had been rejected by the Upper House, it was considered in a modified version for the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992 (Brigitte Geissel and Evelin Hust 2005). As a result, one-third of the seats in rural local bodies have been reserved for women on a rotating basis.

The *Gram Panchayat* constitutes the lowest tier of local self-government in rural India. In clusters of villages, elections are conducted at regular intervals to appoint a president and council members. The elected representatives hold meetings and take decisions regarding the collection of taxes, the selection of beneficiaries for welfare schemes and the provision of key services, such as health, education, and small-scale infrastructure.

Since the constitutional amendments came into force in 1993, the number of EWRs in rural bodies has constantly increased, with the current figure standing at about 1.5 million (UN Women in *The Statesman* 2012).

Thus, the criterion of numbers has been fulfilled, and the policy trend in various federal states has been to raise the share of reserved seats for women in local councils. In 2009, the Government of India even considered to fix gender quotas in the *Panchayati Raj Institutions* nationwide at the 50 percent level.

However, after twenty years of implementing the affirmative action policy, there is no consensus regarding what is actually to be expected from EWRs. Whether women in local government posts would act as change agents with regard to rural service delivery or whether they would merely adopt established rules of doing politics has remained an open question.

### EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON GENDER QUOTAS IN INDIA

During the last two decades, ample research has been conducted on women's reservations in India's local government system. Previous economic studies mainly focused on political selection (Timothy Besley, Rohini Pande, and Vijayendra Rao 2005; Radu Ban and Vijayendra Rao 2008; Lori Beaman, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Esther Duflo, Rohini Pande, and Petia Topalova 2009), and on the effects of gender quotas on policy preferences, targeting, and service outcomes (Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo 2004; Pranab K. Bardhan, Dilip Mookherjee, and Monica Parra Torrado 2010).

First and foremost, India's quota policy has effectively improved women's access to political office. Beaman et al. (2009) found that women are more likely to contest for and win unreserved seats in rural councils that have been continuously filled by a woman president in previous terms. This is also mirrored by the fact that the current number of EWRs across the country exceeds the mandated one-third quota for women in local councils.

When it comes to measuring performance, large-scale surveys have evaluated EWRs based on stereotyped expectations of their gender identity rather than leadership quality per se. Not surprisingly, the findings of existing studies are mixed. While there is some evidence that decision makers who are women allocate more resources to presumably "pro-women services," such as drinking water facilities (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004), findings from other studies do not confirm such a relation (Ban and Rao 2008; Bardhan, Mookherjee, and Torrado 2010) or suggest that EWRs respond to the expressed needs of all of their constituents (Karl-Oskar Lindgren, Magdalena Inkinen, and Sten Widmalm 2009).

A major shortcoming of large-scale surveys on gender quotas, which have been conducted across Indian federal states, is that they tend to neglect the respective institutional contexts with varying historical and cultural backgrounds (Kudva and Misra 2008). Such research approaches apparently assume that all women share identical circumstances and face universal constraints to political participation.

With an increased selection of EWRs on one side and mixed outcomes on the other side, it is imperative to read between the lines of a number-driven quota policy. An evaluation of the effects of gender quotas requires a more contextualized understanding of the processes by which women decide to engage in public action. Given that women's identities intersect with local institutions, it does not seem appropriate to value their political agency without referring to heterogeneity.

### WOMEN'S POLITICAL AGENCY

Based on a reinterpretation of empirical evidence from India, I will present four archetypes of women's political agency in different settings. Existing studies were reviewed within the framework of a qualitative research synthesis. In recent years, qualitative research syntheses have become increasingly popular, as they enable the integration of knowledge from different disciplines and foster the initiation of public debate (Claire Howell Major and Maggi Savin-Baden 2010). For an excellent survey of this methodology, the interested reader may refer to Karin Hannes and Craig Lockwood (2012). As it was not intended to generalize from a sample to a population, but to find as much variation as possible with regard to women's political agency, I employed a purposeful sampling approach (Harsh Suri 2011). The decision of whether to include a study in the sample was guided by quality criteria for conducting interpretive research syntheses (Mary Dixon-Woods, Debbie Cavers, Shona Agarwal, Ellen Annandale, Antony Arthur, Janet Harvey, Ron Hsu et al. 2006).<sup>2</sup>

#### Proxy

The term "proxy" is widespread to refer to women who are characterized by complete passivity and lack of agency (Shail Mayaram 2002); in other words, invisibility is their identity in the local government system (Santosh Singh 2009). Such a situation corresponds to settings, where husbands run the local council in their wives' names. Except for signing official documents, these so-called *pradhan patis* resume all tasks:<sup>3</sup> They attend local council meetings, take decisions, and in an interview they answer questions on behalf of their wives. Thus, reserved seats for women are just a means to an end for husbands to access local government positions.

While it is difficult to obtain reliable figures on the extent of "rule by proxy" across India, in her follow-up field survey on EWRs, Nirmala Buch (2010) found that 90 percent of the respondents were of the opinion that the number of proxies was widespread in Uttar Pradesh. Georges Kristoffel Lieten and Ravi Srivastava (1999) provide a vivid account on the reality of women proxy members in local councils in this federal state – a phenomenon, which was reconfirmed more recently by case-study research

(see Sujoy Dutta 2012). Only 40 and 20 percent of the people reported “rule by proxy” in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan respectively (Buch 2010). Interestingly, it was observed that the prevalence of proxies in local councils increased in the federal state of Bihar, where gender quotas had even been lifted to 50 percent in 2006 (Trustlaw 2011).

### **Ineffective representative**

Empirical evidence suggests that inexperienced or illiterate women have been purposefully selected for reserved seats in local councils because they can be better controlled by powerful local leaders (Jos Chathukulam and M. S. John 2000; Erik Bryld 2001). Because capable women are considered as a threat or “depriving men of their chances” (Anupma Kaushik and Gayatri Shaktawat 2010: 480), they may be discouraged from contesting in local elections. Sometimes, male family members also nominate their uneducated wives in order to retain power in the village.

The expressed distaste for EWRs among women villagers may be explained through the internalization of prescribed behavior that “a female leader, by virtue of being a counter-stereotypic figure, makes women’s traditional roles appear lower-status and therefore women react negatively to this” (Beaman et al. 2009: 1528). Statements like, “Family members insisted, but you see, it’s so humiliating. All these women make fun of me all the time and tell me that I am no more than a peon in the panchayat” (Ranjita Mohanty 2006: 86), corroborate such negative reactions. It was also reported that male villagers bypassed EWRs and turned to male council members in order to get a problem solved because government representatives who are women were considered “no good” or “incapable” (Bryld 2001: 161).

The reproduction of stereotyped assumptions about women’s leadership serves to make women subject to multiple doses of humiliation, discrimination, and exclusion (Mohanty 2006).

### **Co-opted party politician**

Although village councils in most of the federal states are supposed to function on a party-neutral basis, *de facto* there is considerable interference of political parties (Shirin M. Rai 2007). However, only a few women in rural regions have a political party affiliation (Anne Marie Goetz 2007; Alice Morris, Arun Kumar, and Geeta Sharma 2009; Buch 2010). As a result, women often depend on influential functionaries to gain access to political parties. If these linkages are not legitimized through caste or family relations, women risk being considered “socially unattractive” or “sexually suspect” (Goetz 2007: 97), hence losing their integrity. Moreover, political competition is related to dangers of physical and sexual assault

(Goetz 2007). Therefore, women may refrain from becoming party members, which in turn, makes their political participation at the local government level more difficult.

For many women who opt for political participation, the masculinity of party cultures restricts their agency. In Kerala, local politicians disciplined women members and did not allow their independent functioning to prevent loss of control for the party. Women who had prior experience with political parties found it relatively easier to accommodate themselves. Consequently, women, who identified with the working culture of political parties, repeatedly contested local elections. On the other hand, the more rigid local party structures were, the more challenges did EWRs face regarding their political agency (Chathukulam and John 2000). Factionalism within local parties has also led to adverse gender effects, including violence against women members (see Seemanthini Niranjana [2002] for evidence from Andhra Pradesh).

### Development altruist

Context-specific narratives and discourses constitute a strong basis for the construction of EWRs' political agency. Through the discourse of the Left Front government's "People's Planning Campaign," which aimed at participatory governance and local planning during the mid-1990s, women in Kerala identified as development agents rather than as politicians. Even today, the local council is interpreted as a "non-political space, the space of development altruism – and therefore, by definition, demanding of 'feminine capacities'" (J. Devika and Binitha V. Thampi 2011: 1168). Another dimension in this construction of gendered identities has been that, unlike in the domains of education, child welfare, and primary health care, officials of line departments and parastatal agencies have not given due recognition to EWRs (Chathukulam and John 2000).

Turning to Andhra Pradesh, poverty alleviation programs from 1995 to 2004 were realized entirely through local women's groups with the goal to enhance income-generating activities for their members. However, these "neoliberal rules for the new woman citizen" have been criticized (Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj 2004: 13), as they did not provide any opportunities for EWRs to acquire political skills. The dominant discourse was: "improve your household's economic condition, participate in local community development (if you have the time), help build and run local (apolitical) institutions like the self-help group; by then, you should have no political or physical energy left to challenge this paradigm" (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2004: 13). Others observed that poverty schemes that were managed by local governments in Andhra Pradesh functioned according to a rationale that considered women as passive "recipients of welfare" instead of as active agents shaping development processes (Niranjana 2002: 369).



The emphasis on women in local development programs is thus explicitly linked to an understanding of women as the self-sacrificing and apolitical centers of the patriarchal family. As long as women identify with and correspond to these stereotypes, they are less likely to encounter negative responses to their activities as elected representatives.

### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: FEMINIST IDENTITY ECONOMICS

Theories of rational choice assume that political participation is a result of rational considerations of autonomous individuals. Accordingly, citizens become politically involved after a rational weighing of the costs and benefits of participation. Apart from opportunity costs of participation, decision making may also be determined by how actors perceive themselves in relation to others, which “effectively makes choice a function of identity and, more particularly, our self-perceptions” (Kristen Renwick Monroe 2001: 157).

One of the most prominent attempts to model identity in economics is George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton’s (2000, 2010) neoclassical strategy, which includes identity-related payoffs as arguments in the utility function.<sup>4</sup> They make the basic assumption that individuals may belong to one of two social categories, which they label as Green and Red. These social categories are associated with specific rules of behavior that individuals internalize in a process, which constitutes their identity or sense of self. In Akerlof and Kranton’s prototype game-theoretical model, two individuals  $i$  and  $j$ , which initially belong to the Green category, interact with each other and are able to choose between Activity 1 and Activity 2. An individual’s choice of her preferred activity will result in utility  $V$ . Suppose the prescribed rules of behavior for Greens correspond to Activity 1. If  $i$  opted for Activity 2, this individual would not be considered a proper Green any longer as she followed behavior usually ascribed to Reds.

Consequently, individual  $i$  would lose her identity  $I_s$ , where  $s$  refers to self. Due to externalities, player  $j$  would also incur a loss of identity  $I_o$ , where  $o$  refers to other. As internalized rules are violated here, anxiety is generated, which leads to actions aimed at restoring the individual’s “sense of unity.” Hence, individual  $j$  may respond to individual  $i$ ’s action of violating prescribed rules of behavior for Greens. This would allow for a restoration of  $j$ ’s identity at a cost  $c$ , while posing a loss  $L$  to individual  $i$ .

The implications of identification shed among others new light on phenomena of gender discrimination, the household division of labor, the economics of exclusion and poverty (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), the economics of education (Akerlof and Kranton 2002), and contract theory (Akerlof and Kranton 2005). In the following, I apply Akerlof and Kranton’s identity economics lens to the implementation of India’s

gender quotas in order to obtain a better analytical understanding on women's political agency. Proponents of the old institutionalist tradition in economics have long emphasized that identities are expressed in norm-guided behavior (Carsten Herrmann-Pillath 2010). In a similar vein, feminist scholars have applied a "gendered logic of appropriateness" (Louise Chappell 2006: 229) to their research concerns because they conceive of institutions as "bearers of gender" (Diane Elson 1999: 611). From this it follows that gendered structures of constraint prescribe behavior in the following way: "Citizens can do X, noncitizens cannot. Men can do Y, women cannot" (Nancy Folbre 1994: 40). Reverting to identity economics, this prescribed behavior determines an individual's actions in matching the ideal of gender roles in the family and participation in politics (Wen-Chun Chang 2011).

Before the enactment of the 73rd Constitutional Amendments in India, the predominant default rule for women was "do not participate in politics." The introduction of affirmative action policies in 1993, which enabled women's political participation in the local government system, can be conceived of as a "top down revolution" (Poornima Vyasulu and Vinod Vyasulu 2000: 42) or an "exogenous shock" (Kudva and Misra 2008: 62) to the social structures in various settings. Grounded in feminist thought, I argue that uniform quota rules have led to the shaping of diverse gendered identities and consequently different archetypes of women's agency in the political domain (see Figure 1).

There are two individuals (Players) belonging to one of two gender categories, male or female.<sup>5</sup> Both players choose between Activity 1 (do not participate in politics) and Activity 2 (participate in politics). A player earns utility  $V$  if she chooses her preferred activity; otherwise she earns zero utility. According to the default rule, the behavioral prescription for a woman is Activity 1. Suppose a woman chooses Activity 2, that is to participate in politics, this decision would imply a loss of her female identity equal to  $I_s$ . Moreover, this choice would lead to a loss of identity  $I_o$  to the other player because gendered prescriptions of "appropriate" activities are violated.

The identity game has got four Nash equilibria (Akerlof and Kranton 2000), which can be associated to archetypes of women's agency in local governments.

Suppose a woman, who has internalized the default rule with its gendered prescription "women do not participate in politics," is the first mover (Player 1). In a sub-game perfect equilibrium, Player 1 would always choose Activity 1 and would not even consider Activity 2 as an option. Hence, female Player 2s does not opt for political engagement (Activity 1) regardless of how Player 1 would react, had she decided to participate in politics (Activity 2). This equilibrium corresponds to empirical cases, where women are just "proxies" in the local government system.

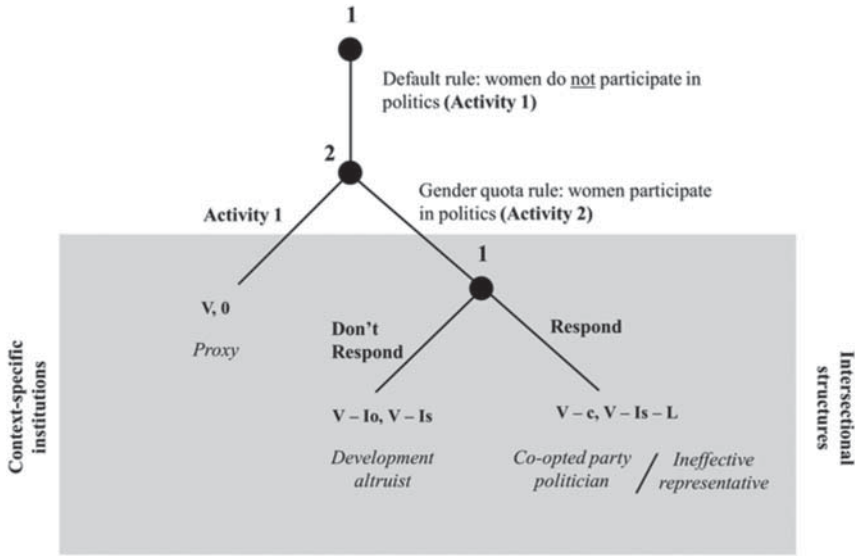


Figure 1 Identity archetypes of women's agency in local governments  
 Source: Adopted and modified from Akerlof and Kranton (2000).

However, the introduction of gender-quota rules enables Player 2 to choose either Activity 1 or Activity 2. Suppose there is a female Player 2 with a taste for Activity 2, which means to participate in politics. As a result, Player 1 may opt for one of the following two strategies:

- (i) "Respond" to Player 2's choice of participating in politics in order to restore her own identity at a cost  $c$ , while Player 2 faces a loss  $L$ . The equilibrium, where Player 1 successfully deters women (Player 2s) from political participation, will prevail when the loss of identity to Player 1s from women engaging in local politics is high ( $I_o > c$ ), and when the loss of identity to Player 2s as well as the punishment imposed by Player 1s are high ( $I_s + L > V$ ). Here, women's agency corresponds to situations, in which EWRs are labeled as "ineffective representatives" facing severe negative reactions from community members.

The equilibrium, where Player 1s chooses "Respond" ( $c < I_o$ ), but this action does not prevent female Player 2s from engaging in politics, will only be realized if women's utility from political participation is greater than the incurred identity costs and other losses ( $V > I_s + L$ ). This would be applicable to the case of "co-opted party politician", who has adjusted to male-dominated institutions.

- (ii) "Don't Respond," which implies a loss  $I_o$ , while Player 2 faces a loss  $I_s$ . Women choose to participate in politics if  $V > I_s$ , and Player 1s does not respond because  $c > I_o$ . As the archetype of "development altruist" exemplified, women conform to public expectations of how EWRs should behave. At the same time, challenging women has become more costly as their apolitical participation has been legitimized through complementary local development initiatives.

### POLICY OPTIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The preceding analysis elicited four identity archetypes of women's political agency: "proxy," "ineffective representative," "co-opted party politician," and "development altruist." Albeit suggesting different degrees of political participation in various settings, such a static conception of women's agency would be oversimplified. The policy relevance of adopting gender quotas lies precisely in the malleability of identities. However, this requires a different conceptualization of institutions as they do not only represent constraints on behavior but "may actually change the character and beliefs of the individual" (Geoffrey M. Hodgson 2004: 257).

Building on Hodgson's understanding of institutions, Jamie Morgan and Wendy Olsen (2011) introduce the concept of *mezzorules*,<sup>6</sup> which acknowledges the interrelation of institutions and identity. Rather than rigid restrictions, *mezzorules* constitute norm situations that entail a range of behavioral prescriptions in a given context. *Mezzorules* suggest a codification of "in circumstance X *be* Y that does Z" (Morgan and Olsen 2011: 449; emphasis added), which implies that sometimes actors have to redefine themselves. Thus, an individual's identity is molded by the prevailing institutional set-up, but not fully determined by it. Actors have to figure out and decide to which of the existing narratives and norms they adhere to. Such a conceptualization enables a less deterministic view on social structures (Wendy Olsen and Jamie Morgan 2010). As a result, identity becomes a mediator between structure and agency: "To aim to 'be' something that acts in a certain way is a special form of doing that can create tension and can cause change" (Olsen and Morgan 2010: 544).

Further, it is important to acknowledge that women are not a monolithic actor group. Regional background, class, ethnicity, and religion are just a few of the cleavages that divide women. By the early 1990s, the concept of intersectionality, which was developed by Patricia Hill Collins (1993) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), challenged and further highlighted the limitations of treating gender as a uniform category and entry point of analysis. Intersectionality constructs the category of women in "a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another" (Chandra Talpade Mohanty 2003: 32). Thus, there may be both

divergences as well as similarities in women's experiences across time and regions.

Women's located identities are constituted by a set of social structures within a particular setting, which implies an understanding of gender as a multidimensional institution (Irene van Staveren and Olasunbo Odebo 2007). Even though feminist scholars have highlighted the need to employ an intersectional perspective (Rose M. Brewer, Cecilia A. Conrad, and Mary C. King 2002), the effects of multiple identities have been insufficiently addressed in economic analysis (Kanchana N. Ruwanpura 2008).

Against this background, I provide a more nuanced account of EWRs' agency in India. I acknowledge that women's costs and benefits from political engagement are determined by local institutions and intersectional structures (see the gray shaded area in Figure 1). It becomes clear that shedding light on this gray area provides multiple entry points for changing identity parameters and enhancing women's political agency.

### Promoting visibility and women's political leadership

In situations where women's potential utility from engaging in politics is perceived to be considerably smaller than the utility that is actually derived from protecting their identity as women, refraining from political participation will persist. When women remain invisible and hence earn zero utility from political participation, it is vital to introduce additional measures that foster women's leadership identities.

The phenomenon of proxies is particularly pronounced in regions, where *purdah* norms exist. *Purdah* literally means "curtain" and implies the segregation of men and women along physical, behavioral, and economic lines (Naila Kabeer 2001). The practice of *purdah* is strongly correlated with restrictions on women's agency (Tim Dyson and Mick Moore 1983; Lupin Rahman and Vijayendra Rao 2004), as it involves seclusion, practice of veiling, and the requirement of male escorts in the public sphere (Buch 2010). For women in *purdah*, it is impossible to speak out in front of many villagers in a community meeting and perform the functions of a local government representative (Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Aloysius Irudayam, and Emma Sydenham 2009).

While the *purdah* norm is followed by more than 85 percent of the women in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, its extent is rather low (10–12 percent) in South Indian states, such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka (Sonalde B. Desai, Amaresh Dubey, Brij Lal Joshi, Mitali Sen, Abusaleh Shariff, and Reeve Vanneman 2010). Apart from this regional variation, the gender norm intersects with caste identity. Whereas *purdah* is generally not common among lower castes and tribes, it is widespread among upper-caste communities as a sign of upward mobility,

indicating the increased wealth of families (Saraswati Raju, Peter J. Atkins, Naresh Kumar, and Janet G. Townsend 1999).

As noted by a woman villager in Haryana, *purdah* “is not a matter of preference or non-preference . . . Whenever there is any violation of *purdah* . . . negative sanctions are used by the village elders” (S. R. Ahlawat and Neerja Ahlawat 2009: 153). Besides social enforcement, the norm has been internalized by women who understand it as a mark of honorable behavior. Consequently, women impose controls on mobility on their daughters and other women relatives. In this way, women contribute to the reproduction of repressive social structures, which makes them more subordinate than if it were only men who limited their agency (Bryld 2001).

The *purdah* norm and “rule by proxy” correspond to so-called “slow-moving institutions” (Gérard Roland 2004: 116). The question is how such persisting social norms could be aligned with the fast-moving institution of mandatory political reservations for women. A recent government intervention in northern India addressed proxy ruling by imposing a fine on husbands who attended local council meetings on behalf of their wives (Trustlaw 2011; *The Telegraph* 2012). While similar government orders failed in Rajasthan, it remains to be seen whether these sanctions will be effective to combat “rule by proxy” in other federal states (*The Telegraph* 2012). One potential problem with this type of complementary institution is that, if women are illiterate and have no prior leadership experience, the notion of “proxy” risks to be transformed straightaway into one of “ineffective representative.” Moreover, it should be noted that there are different degrees of “rule by proxy.” Indeed, some support by male family members has been acknowledged by women. For instance, women expressed appreciation with the advice on topics of which they had very little knowledge, and escorts given by husbands were perceived as helpful while travelling to new and distant locations to conduct meetings with men (Bryld 2001).

Apart from becoming visible, it seems particularly important that women themselves derive positive utility from political participation. Coming to be known by their own names rather than those of their husbands enables women to establish a public identity other than by proxy (Niraja Gopal Jayal 2006; Stefanie Strulik 2007). In fact, there are underestimated mobilization effects of EWRs actually being in political office (Geissel and Hust 2005). The experience of being a local council member contributes to women’s confidence, giving them the ability to talk back and to take pride in their accomplishments (Jana Everett 2009). Providing women with opportunities of “political apprenticeship” (Andrea Cornwall and Anne Marie Goetz 2005: 784; Kudva and Misra 2008) fosters this creation of women’s leadership identity. Beaman et al. (2009) found that exposure to EWRs through reserved seats weakens stereotypes about gender roles and eliminates negatively biased priors on the effectiveness of women leaders.

In Tamil Nadu, the lobbying efforts of EWRs under the “Tamil Nadu Federation of Women Panchayat Presidents” have led to institutional change of retaining women’s reservations for two terms instead of one. This intervention is supposed to give EWRs more opportunities for political apprenticeship (*The Hindu* 2006). In the meantime, there have been discussions at the central government level on rethinking the tenure of women in local councils. With regard to the public sphere, it was observed that some women stopped using their veil after engaging in *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (Buch 2010). In other instances, women in leadership positions did not tolerate that proxies attended their local council meetings (Ahlawat and Ahlawat 2009). These cases suggest that women conceived of the prevailing gender norms as malleable mezzorules and that change has occurred “from within.” Women have acted as what evolutionary economists call “identity entrepreneurs” (Jason Potts 2011: 90) and researchers in the feminist institutionalist tradition refer to as “gender equity entrepreneurs” (Chappell 2006: 230).

### **Fostering acceptance through collective forms of identification**

When engaging in public action, negative responses from community members, which entail lasting identity losses for women, should be minimized. In West Bengal, Beaman et al. (2009) found that villagers preferred male local council leaders and had negatively biased priors on the effectiveness of women leaders. A possible explanation for this attitude is provided by deeply entrenched social norms, which prescribe that women should not lead. Empirical evidence also substantiates a “backlash hypothesis”: by expressing a dislike for EWRs, male villagers rebel against the institution of gender quotas that forces them to elect women. It turned out that a dislike for women prevails in communities where local council positions had been additionally reserved for members from the historically disadvantaged Scheduled Caste groups. This implies an intersection of the quota rule with caste-based institutions.

The institution of no-confidence motion is included in the *Panchayati Raj* Acts of several federal states and contributes to the construction of women as “ineffective representatives.” This rule enables elected members of local councils to remove their president. Most acts emphasize the requirement of a two-thirds majority to get a no-confidence motion against local council leaders passed. Usually, no-confidence motions cannot be initiated against an elected leader, before he or she has completed two years in office.

In this connection, it has been repeatedly observed that no-confidence motions were misused to disqualify EWRs. For instance, Mayaram (2002) documents that a series of no-confidence motions were realized exactly after the mandatory two years of EWRs’ candidature had been completed.



Moreover, no-confidence motions were filed even if the concerned EWRs had performed well (Buch 2010). Women government representatives from the historically disadvantaged Scheduled Castes were particularly challenged by dominant caste members (Mangubhai, Irudayam, and Sydenham 2009). This is in line with the study by Ban and Rao (2009) who found that caste structures may be correlated with structures of patriarchy, making the political agency of low-caste women particularly difficult.

Against this backdrop, there is a risk that no-confidence motions are instrumentalized to disrupt women's political participation and construct an identity of "failed EWRs" (Sreevidya Kalaramadam 2012). In fact, no-confidence motions legitimize and reduce the costs *c* of behaving negatively toward EWRs' public action as the institution is legally enshrined in the *Panchayati Raj* Acts of several federal states.

In some settings, institutional innovations for enabling women's political participation have been introduced. Among these are "women-only institutions" that aim at addressing negatively biased assumptions about women's political agency. Implicitly, it is assumed that women can better voice their preferences among other women. All-women institutions may also help women to gain access to decision-making processes and build up support for one another through the initiation of collective action. In this way, it is possible to strengthen their common political-leadership identity and minimize losses, which implies less severe responses to women's public action.

In Uttarakhand, so-called "Whole Village Groups" were established by a local NGO at the same time when gender quotas were introduced. These groups, comprising only of women villagers, have been engaged in activities related to the management of natural resources. Women gained respect from both men and women through their village-related activities. In this way, the local movement created "social and collective spaces with the consequence that challenging gender norms did not result in alienating them which often comes when there are attempts to cause sudden ruptures in everyday normative practices" (Divya Sharma and Ratna M. Sudarshan 2010: 49). Not only did women demand more accountability from the local councils, but EWRs who had experience with the "Whole Village Groups" were also able to shift the agenda from mere infrastructure provision to a more needs-based approach (Sharma and Sudarshan 2010).

In a similar vein, an independent farmers' organization in Maharashtra established all-women *panchayats* and was able to gain acceptance from both women and men (C. Gala 1997). The all-women *panchayats* dealt with everyday challenges in rural areas, such as access to water, fodder, and fuel. It was found that the success of the organization's collective action strategy for change can be contrasted with enclave strategies (which focus only on a poor minority section of the villages) and radical strategies



(which tend to insist only on women's action and are hostile to male involvement).

In view of the fact that some women feel uncomfortable about openly showing their membership in a women's group for fear that this might be considered as a challenge to the existing norms (Ratna M. Sudarshan 2008), it seems particularly important to create socially accepted spaces of collective identification. Otherwise, women may incur additional losses from joining all-women institutions.

### **Revealing private not public preferences**

Ideally, women should not encounter any identity costs, and they should experience increased utility from political participation. The decision situation related to the archetype of "co-opted party politician" serves to illustrate in greater detail how women may recodify prevailing norms that entail public preferences with respect to their role as EWRs.

While male local government representatives generally engage in party politics, women are actually not supposed to do so. As a result of these contradictory mezzorules, women have to reflect on their roles as elected representatives and redefine themselves by choosing one of the following options:

- (i) Women may contest a local election based on political party symbols, while preferring to do so. For instance, women from elite groups, who have already been long-term members of political parties (Devika and Thampi 2011) are likely to incur no additional identity costs. Some political parties have also established institutions to preserve women's integrity. For instance, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) Party in Tamil Nadu formed all-women branches "to create sexually safe arenas in which to capture women's political energies" (Goetz 2007: 99). The same holds true for parties, which are organized based on religious or ethnic chauvinism, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In Maharashtra, it was reported that members of the Shiv Sena's women's wing "who otherwise feel sidelined from the core centers of power in the party, narratively and performatively constitute identities in ways that allow them to insert themselves visually into the peripheries of power" (Tarini Bedi 2007: 1537).
- (ii) Although disliking the approach of male council leaders who distribute patronage to those faithful to the party, women may subscribe to a political party in local elections (Chathukulam and John 2000). In this case, women's private preferences, namely identification as nonpartisan, do not find open expression. As women hide their actual preferences, this behavior is in line with

preference falsification. In such decision situations, an individual can protect her reputation in the eyes of others through revealing public rather than private preferences (Timur Kuran 1995).

- (iii) Women may refrain from being affiliated to a political party and consequently not stand for local elections. As recently evidenced in Karnataka, where even 50 percent of the local government seats have been reserved for women, political parties reported that they were not able to file candidates because “women perceive politics as a dirty game from which they cannot emerge with their reputation intact” (*The Times of India* 2010). With their choice of not contesting local elections based on party symbols, women are able to restore their nonpartisan identity. However, they face the loss of not being able to engage in public action, given that they are generally interested in doing so. Women are actually being deterred from becoming local government representatives due to the dominating norms of party politics.
- (iv) Finally, women may refrain from showing allegiance to any political party, but they may nevertheless contest in local elections. For instance, some EWRs in Kerala have been characterized by “the relative lack of near-total dominance of any one political party and a popular struggle beyond political divisions” (Devika and Thampi 2011: 1173; see also T. G. Suresh 2009). This choice suggests that some women have been able to remain true to their nonpartisan identity, while engaging in public action.

In sum, political party norms have posed challenges of autonomy versus integration, marginalization versus cooptation, and cooperation versus competition for women (Rai 2007). Whereas the first three choices imply that the status quo of political party interference in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions is maintained, the latter choice has a great potential for social change, as EWRs can act independently from the patronage of the predominantly male party elite.

### **Overcoming stereotyped accounts on women's political agency**

Women who participate in local councils are often expected to conform to acting as “women's representatives” and to deal with issues that are tailored to women and children (Kaushik and Shaktawat 2010). As a result, women resort to identifications that appear to reinforce gender stereotypes: as mothers and guardians of community welfare. However, if these stereotyped expectations conflict with women's actual self-perception, this implies a reduction in utility.

Trying to change the meaning of existing identities through network-based learning seems to be a promising approach. It has been noted that

women who have an identity outside the household are more likely to be politically active (Pradeep Chhibber 2002) and that access to outside role models improves women's bargaining power (Robert Jensen and Emily Oster 2009). The diversification of networks enables exchange between women with different experiences and creates links to women role models from various backgrounds (Eeshani Kandpal and Kathy Baylis 2013).

EWRs in Gujarat allied and drafted a memorandum to protest about the so-called "two-child norm." This rule, which is included in the *Panchayati Raj* Acts of several federal states, prescribes that community members having more than two children are disqualified from contesting in local elections or have to step down from their government posts. Here, the twin identities of "mother" and "EWR" are constructed as mutually exclusive and are in an antagonistic relationship to each other. Federated EWRs highlighted that this rule violated human rights and was "anti-women" (*The Times of India* 2011).

Rather than reproducing stereotyped gender patterns, alternative training models could promote interaction among peer groups of women. Through such forms of "alternative resocialization," which involve an interweaving with local environmental and social movements, it is also hoped that EWRs will not just replicate the standard ways of doing politics and will act in the collective interest of both men and women (Mayaram 2002: 404).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that an identity economics perspective, updated with feminist intersectional and institutional theories, can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender quotas. Through an innovative research approach, which combined context-specific thick description with the analytical rigor of a game theoretical model, it was possible to detect both social structures that hinder and institutional innovations that foster women's political agency in local governments. The research started off with a conceptualization of institutions as gendered intersectional structures of constraint that entail different identity costs for women. In order to understand how these parameters may be changed, the fluid character of institutions in the form of mezzorules was highlighted.

The analysis shows that the implementation of affirmative action policies cannot be investigated in isolation but needs to be understood in the light of context-specific institutions. Although quota rules provide a mandate for women's political agency, gender norms and local discourses may prescribe diverging behavior. Most importantly, it is not entirely clear what is to be expected from women in local government posts. Instead, the quota policies raise several questions that have remained unanswered: "Should women primarily represent women? ... Do we expect an ideal female

politician to be any different from an ideal male politician? If so, then in what way?" (Medha Nanivadekar 2006: 123).

This vacuum tends to be filled with assumptions about women's leadership identity that arise from prevailing mezzorules. Local institutions in turn intersect with other social structures, so that EWRs from different socioeconomic and regional backgrounds face varying identity costs. These often contradictory institutional settings may create instances of *aporia*<sup>7</sup> – being at a loss – for women who consider contesting in local elections. Following institutions in a specific situation is a creative act as their meaning is hardly self-evident but needs to be interpreted. Similarly, local discourses define gender roles not final behavior, and these roles are subject to negotiation. Consequently, women have to figure out whether and, if yes, how prevailing gender norms could be bent in order to participate in politics as prescribed by quota policies. To restore their identity in public, women may resort to individual strategies, such as “gendered preference falsification.” This, however, implies that EWRs are trapped in conformity bias, such as simply imitating stereotyped leadership types or male-dominated party cultures.

The findings cast doubt on the assumption that providing governing rights to women will be equally empowering in all settings. When compared to essentialist assertions of gender quotas, women's identities are context-specific and vary across local sub-groups. Due to gender-based behavioral prescriptions and the related identity costs, reserved seats for women risk being only of limited effectiveness. Consequently, gender quotas and related legislations should not only be evaluated based on quantifiable outcomes, such as the number of EWRs, but they should also be examined for their interactions with local institutions and associated identity costs.

Empirical evidence suggests that successful cases of women's political participation, which involve a minimization of identity costs, have typically occurred at the local level. Another implication that follows from this study is that identity entrepreneurs do not necessarily or always have to be EWRs. Civil-society organizations can also make an important contribution to change stereotyped understandings of women's leadership.

Ultimately, local institutional change does not only require women to develop leadership identities in order to become accepted as elected representatives. In the long run, the way local governance and politics are constructed through identity-based behavioral prescriptions needs to be renegotiated by both men and women. Therefore, future work with a gender-sensitive research agenda should pay due respect to both women's and men's identity costs and how these impact political agency.

*Ulrike Mueller*  
*University of Hohenheim*

*Institute of Agricultural Economics and Social Sciences in the Tropics and Subtropics*  
 Wollgrasweg 43, Stuttgart 70599, Germany  
 e-mail: [ulrike\\_mueller@uni-hohenheim.de](mailto:ulrike_mueller@uni-hohenheim.de)

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

**Ulrike Mueller** is Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Institute of Agricultural Economics and Social Sciences in the Tropics and Subtropics, University of Hohenheim. She earned her PhD from Humboldt University Berlin and was a visiting scholar at the “Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis,” Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research interests center on the analysis of institutions, policy processes, and governance dilemmas in the developing world from a gender and behavioral economics perspective.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Accurately defined, one should refer to “sex quotas” rather than “gender quotas” as the institution is grounded in biological characteristics of men and women, rather than in aspects related to socialization. However, I use “gender quotas” as it is the more commonly employed term in the academic literature and in public (Mona Lena Krook, Joni Lovenduski, and Judith Squires 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> A full elaboration of the methodological approach employed in the interpretive research synthesis is beyond the scope of this article. Further details on selection and analysis of the empirical studies are available from the author upon request.
- <sup>3</sup> *Pradhan* refers to the head of the local council, and *pati* means husband.
- <sup>4</sup> See John B. Davis (2011) for a review and critical assessment of alternative conceptions of identity in the explanation of economic behavior.
- <sup>5</sup> The model may be criticized on grounds of employing a heteronormative view. In fact, India is one of the few countries having a recognized “third gender.” However, as empirical evidence on the political participation of so-called *hijras* (men who identify as women) is limited, I deem a model with two distinct gender categories appropriate for my specific research concern.
- <sup>6</sup> Adopted from the singing voice type mezzo-soprano, the prefix *mezzo* refers to “not quite being the thing,” namely soprano (Olsen and Morgan 2010: 549).
- <sup>7</sup> Adopting the term from Greek philosophy, Morgan and Olsen (2011) use *aporia* to refer to fluid rule forms that require creative responses by actors.

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