**Men as gatekeepers**

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The concept of gender has been misunderstood around the world. It is assumed to be something concerning women only while it really concerns both women and men as well as transgender persons. It is the relationship between the sexes – at home and among the larger power structures.

Much activism and development work on gender both in Pakistan as well as in other contexts does not get adequately contextualized by focusing only on women and not considering the relationship between women and men. An excellent new paper in the American Political Science Review by Ali Cheema, Sarah Khan, Asad Liaqat and Shandana Khan Mohmand on ‘Canvassing the Gatekeepers: A Field Experiment to Increase Voters’ Turnout in Pakistan’ fills this gap regarding women’s political participation by identifying men as the ‘gatekeepers’.

The underlying message in the paper is that there are power relationships between women and men in the intra-household dynamics particularly in patriarchal structures such as ours. There are lots of informational and motivational short-term campaigns to get women to vote in the elections before every such cycle based on the ‘resources’ and ‘political networks’ theorization. For example, in the last 2018 general elections, 11 million less women voted compared to men signifying a large enough gender gap in voting.

Yet, these short-term campaigns targeting women only to facilitate a better turnout for women in the elections often don’t succeed too much because they do not target women as well as men. Men are the ‘gatekeepers’ in women’s decision-making and provide avenues of mobility for women; therefore men also need to be targeted if development advocacy campaigns want to increase women’s voting in the elections.

The authors argue that such short-term interventions targeting both women and men to increase women’s turnout in elections can work well in contexts when the overall norms and attitudes are ‘permissive’ of women voting; yet women are practically dependent on men to ‘enable participation’. Often men have greater control over mobile phones and modes of transport that are critical for women to use to vote on election day.

Following an earlier baseline survey, the research was conducted as a field experiment in Lahore in the 2018 national elections through a ‘nonpartisan canvassing campaign’ administered by two local CSOs. The authors state, “In total, 2,500 households in our study are randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: a canvassing visit by a female canvasser targeted at women, a visit by a male canvasser targeted at men, two separate visits by female and male canvassers targeted at women and men, respectively, or no visit (control). The random variation allows us to identify the causal effects of targeting canvassing efforts to women, men, or both on women voters’ turnout.”

In terms of the results of the field experiment where the ink on the thumbs of voters was used as evidence to mark voting in field visits soon after the 2018 elections, the authors did not find verification of increased turnout where only women were targeted for canvassing. However, there was evidence that where only men or both women and women were canvassed, the women’s turnout in the elections did increase.

Women’s turnout increased by 5.4 percentage points where only men were canvassed to motivate them to facilitate the household’s women voting. However, women’s turnout increased even higher to 8 percentage points for households where both women and men were targeted separately by the female and male campaigners to push for women’s voting. The cumulative ‘effect’ of only women being canvassed is insignificant but the overall ‘effect’ of canvassing men to increase women’s turnout increased the “proportion” of women’s turnout by 6.1 percentage points.

This is a very strong result as it shows a direct causal relationship; something so hard to generally find in social science research. It clearly shows women’s turnout increases if you canvass men to facilitate them and it increases even further if you target both women and men of the same household during canvassing as it possibly helps women and men to discuss women voting and politics amongst themselves as well.

The authors have also nuanced their usage of men being ‘permissive’ of women voting. Only less than 10 per cent men thought it was not appropriate for women to vote and more than 90 per cent women considered that they would have the permission to vote by the men in their households. However, men were more restrictive of women’s “more involved forms of participation” such as attending political meetings or standing for office and only one-third of men considered those more intense forms of women’s political participation ‘appropriate’. Therefore, these nuances and limitations have to be kept in mind while analyzing these otherwise very strong causal results of the field experiment in our patriarchal culture.

The authors use another behavioural instrument of the relative ‘take-up’ of two stickers in October 2018 in the same treatment and control households in Lahore as the earlier ones. One sticker had general support for democracy and the other sticker had support for women’s role in democracy. The authors wanted to estimate the impact of short-term canvassing for women’s voting in July 2018 being internalized by men even two months after the elections. They found no significant impact of the canvassing of women’s voting in the treatment of households in terms of the ‘take-up’ of the sticker that had support for women’s role in democracy where only women or only men were canvassed. However, in the households where both women and men were canvassed for the same households to motivate them for women’s voting in July 2018, those men were “2.1 percentage points more likely to accept the women’s support sticker”.

This difference of households where both women and men were canvassed relative to the control group (where no one was canvassed) is 6.2 percentage points. This result again reconfirms that canvassing both women and men of the same households is the best strategy to increase women’s turnout and augment support for women’s role in democracy.

The last instrument used in the field experiment was the endline survey also conducted in October 2018 to ascertain “political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours”. The authors report, “We find no evidence that canvassing – regardless of whether it is targeted at women, men, or both – has an effect on political knowledge, stated level of interest in politics, or sense of self-efficacy. We also do not find any effects on attitudes about the appropriateness of men restricting women’s ability to vote under a set of different conditions. This is in line with our expectations that achieving attitudinal change on gender attitudes and norms in the short-term is difficult”.

The authors end the paper with a good message calling for a “transformative change to the fundamentally unequal status quo that makes women’s participation conditional on male gatekeepers in the first place” despite the fact that their findings are very relevant on “how to achieve change in the short-term within a status quo that designates men as gatekeepers”. We should all strive for that transformational change in gender relations in Pakistan.

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