

The Diffusion of Female Empowerment: Evidence from Social Networks in India

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Abstract: Do men may maintain privileged positions in society simply because most such positions are held by other men? If some women gain access to positions of power, does female empowerment diffuse via social networks? We study these questions in the political context of elections to the Parliament of India, Lok Sabha. To measure social networks, we make use the universe of Facebook friendship links between constituencies across the country. To identify causal effects, we exploit variation in close election wins in the network of each constituency. The results shows that male incumbents benefit from having other male incumbents in the social network of the voters; they are more likely to remain in power. When females randomly win seats, female empowerment (entry, votes, representation) diffuses to other constituencies depending on pre-existing conditions. There is little to no diffusion to areas where female empowerment is very weak to begin. Diffusion appears to occur only when empowerment is already relatively high. Together, the results indicate that unequal representation in the status quo tends to be self-reinforcing, but dynamic trajectories towards equality are possible once sufficient conditions are met.