Female Politicians and Education Attainment: Evidence from State Legislative Elections in India

Despite significant progress in primary schooling, completion rates of secondary and tertiary education are low in India, with considerable gender gaps. This paper studies the impact of female political representation in the State Legislatures on the education attainment of their constituents. Using close elections between men and women as an instrument for elections of a female legislator, I estimate the causal impact of exposure to female politicians in the years prior to starting secondary and tertiary education on subsequent schooling attainment. I find that increasing female political representation increases the probability of attaining secondary and tertiary schooling. These effects primarily accrue to girls in urban areas and not in rural areas or boys. The findings provide suggestive evidence that female legislators affected the education attainment of urban adolescent girls through a change in their education aspirations. Policies found to be effective for reducing gender gaps in schooling include price incentives to schools (fee reduction/elimination) and households (conditional cash transfers), and school infrastructure, but there is limited evidence on the role of aspirations. Interventions that target girls’ aspirations can be an alternative method to reduce gender gaps in schooling.