Who Participates? The “Penalty” of Caste and Ethnicity on Participation in Community Group Programs

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Economic and Social Inequality

Nepal, a small country, has rich cultural diversity with over 100 ethnolinguistic groups, 82 languages and 9 religious groups (CBI 2000). But a history of social discrimination and political and geographic marginalization of groups of people have negatively affected their life outcomes and life chances.

International aid was initiated in Nepal after it ‘opened-up’ to the world in the mid 1960s. Poverty alleviation programs in communities focus on collective action through groups of people working together. An estimated 400,000 ‘sponsored’ micro-level groups have been established to facilitate basic service delivery (Biggins et al. 2004).

Caste and Ethnicity in Nepal

The caste system is a distinct, powerful hierarchal social structure based on the Hindu ideology of notions of ritual and occupational purity and pollution in which one’s identity is ascribed at birth. In Nepal, groups with distinct ethnicities, cultures, social practices and even religion, were subsumed within the caste hierarchy as a strategy for nation building.

Micro Level Community Groups

Organization of people with similar interests at the community level is an entry point for distribution of resources, capacity building, and consolidating collective action and social capital - a widely adopted approach by governments and non-governmental organizations in poor communities.

Women’s Groups: An Example

Generally formed to improve living conditions for women and their families, members conduct cultural and social action programs in their communities. They may regularly contribute to a group fund, taking turns for loans for income generating activities or household needs. Group cohesion and peer pressure substitute for formal collateral.

Research Question

Does the caste/ethnicity of men and women independently influence their participation in community level collective action programs that aim at livelihoods improvement?

The Framework of Social Exclusion

- Formal and informal institutions and practices working in disconnecting groups and individuals from social relations, and create barriers for them in their ability to fully participate in the activities which would be normal and accessible for other groups in the same community (Power and Wilson 2000; Bennell 2008).
- The cultural and social exclusion of people based on ‘who they are’ (or rather ‘who they are perceived to be’) as well as ‘where they are’ (Kabbes 2010).
- Social exclusion based on ascribed identities initiates from childhood and the barriers that they create leads towards continuing experiences of discrimination and disparities in the ability to access opportunities and influence behavior in adulthood as well.

Chitwan Valley: The Study Setting

- Situated in south-central Nepal.
- One of the most multiethnic districts due to resettlement in the 1950s.
- Indigenous Tharu population marginalized due to in-migration.
- Poorer government and governmental services since the late 1970s due to links with two major highways.
- Presence of over 200 non-governmental organizations working on livelihoods support and local development issues.

Data and Measures


Outcome Variables: Participation in Community Programs “Have you ever been a member of any group or associations such as a User’s Group, Mothers Group, a group organized by health volunteers, Rotary Club, or any other type of association or organization?” (Vach, Nova)

Key Independent Variables: Caste and Ethnicity “What is your father’s caste?” 20 different categories recorded and re-coded into four categories following the traditional classification: Bahuns/Chhetris, Dalits, Hill Janajatis, and Terai Janajatis.

Sample Size: 2,345 individuals

Men: 1,173 and Women 1,172 (between ages 25-55 years in 1996)

Interviewing Variables

- Educational attainment
- Adult education
- Media exposure: TV and Cinema
- Travel to Kathmandu
- Salary work ever
- Wage work ever
- In-house business ever
- Opened bank account ever

Analytical Strategy

Logistic regression, using the following equation:

\[ \ln \left( \frac{p}{1-p} \right) = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \ldots + \beta_n x_n \]

where \( p \) is the probability of participating in any community group,
- \( i \) is the odds of participation, \( \alpha \) is a constant term, \( \beta \) is the effect of independent variables in the model, and \( x \) is the value of independent variables. Models are controlled for cluster effects and for standard errors.

Descriptive Statistics

The sample comprised 50% Bahun/Chhetri, a group that has historically been socially and politically powerful. This group also has the highest proportion of individuals who had participated in groups before 1996.

Caste and gender differences in individuals who have earned at least a secondary education, Chitwan 1996:

- Bahuns/Chhetris
- Dalits
- Hill Janajatis
- Terai Janajatis

Results

Odds of participation in community groups by gender and caste/ethnicity among individuals ages 25-55 years, Chitwan 1996.

Notes:
All results are statistically significant at 1% - 10% confidence levels.
The odds ratios shown are from the full model with all controls and interacting variables.

Findings

1. Caste/electricity has an independent and highly significant effect on the participation rates of men and women in community groups – evidence of a strong residual “penalty”

2. Compared to the dominant Bahun/Chhetri group, all other groups have much lower rates of participation.

3. Educational attainment is the most important intervening factor for both men and women.

4. Caste/electricity cuts across wealth and educational attainment.

Discussions and Conclusion

1. Disparities based on social identities – such as caste and ethnicity – are a root cause of conflict in South Asia and around the world.

2. Caste/electricity disadvantaged empirical evidence is crucial for better targeting of individuals and communities for livelihoods improvement.

3. The invisible “penalty” needs to be identified so that the “disadvantage, alienation and lack of freedom” faced by some groups compared to others can be addressed (Kabbes 2000).

Next Steps

1. Semi-structured interviews data to be analyzed to better understand the mechanisms that influence participation in micro level groups.

2. Panel data soon to be available to conduct causal analysis.

References


Photo Credit: Population and Emergency Research Laboratory, Nepal, Institute for Social and Environmental Research, Nepal, and Faculty and students at the Population Studies Centre at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.