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An Analysis of Gender Based Differences in Political Awareness

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Abstract

In order to enable individuals and groups to engage effectively in politics, sufficient levels of political awareness are thought to be necessary. Yet, one of the most recurrent results in the literature is that there are significant difference in the level of political knowledge between men and women with women having less awareness about politics as compared to men. If women systematically have lower levels of awareness than men, they may be less well represented in the democratic system. Keeping this in mind the analysis in this article centres around three issues. First, to examine the nature of gender gap in political awareness. Second, to advance explanations which account for disparities in political awareness. Third, to investigate whether political awareness influences political participation. The study reveals that majority of men dominate the moderate political awareness scale whereas majority of women have come under the low level of awareness score. Educational qualification, occupational status, engagement in political discussion, political interest, place of residence and patterns of media use has strong impact on the amount of political information. No clear association could be found between political awareness and political participation.

Keywords: Political awareness, gender gap, media exposure, political interest, political discussion and political participation

INTRODUCTION

The concept of political awareness is a broad term in political science literature. It has been discussed using different terminologies like political sophistication, political information, political knowledge and political expertise. The concept is at the core of democracy and is "the currency of citizenship".¹ In order to enable individuals and groups to engage effectively in politics, sufficient levels of political awareness are thought to be necessary. Political awareness also allows citizens to make careful evaluations of issues and candidates, promoting more

informed political judgment.² Knowledgeable citizens display higher levels of political participation,³ are more likely to hold incumbents to account for their performance while in office.⁴ Democratic people should have a minimum understanding of the political system where interests are expressed and

¹ Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Scott Keeter (1996). What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,p.8.

² Kim, S.-H., Scheufele, D. A., & Shanahan, J. (2005). Who cares about issues? Issue voting and the role of news media during the 200 US. Presidential election. *Journal of Communication*, 55,103-121.

³ Verba, Sidney., & Norman H., Nie. (1972). *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York: Harper & Row.

⁴ De Vries, Catherine E., and Nathalie Giger (2014), Holding Governments Accountable? Individual Heterogeneity in Performance Voting, *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(2): 345-62.

representatives are elected.⁵ This implies that operation of representative democracy is dependent on political awareness.

Although political awareness is considered to be a vital ingredient of democratic health by a large body of scholars, there is nonetheless ample evidence that political knowledge is unequally distributed.⁶ In particular, one of the most recurrent results in the literature is that there are significant differences in the levels of political knowledge between men and women. Women's poorer knowledge of politics is one of the most persistent findings in nearly every western democracy.⁷

Studying gender differences in political awareness has important implications for representative democracy. A minimal degree of interest in politics coupled with possession of political information and political awareness is a basic requirement for a citizen's involvement and participation in politics. If women systematically have lower levels of knowledge than men, they may be at a disadvantage as far as participation and representation is concerned. This would imply a clear disadvantage in women's capacity to voice their political needs and wishes, and thus to influence the political decision-making process.⁸ It is not the fact that they are women that affects what they know or don't know about politics, but that men and women are situated differently in the social structure, have

different levels of material resources, divergent work tasks and responsibilities, and therefore varying amounts of available time to dedicate to informing themselves about politics.⁹

Scholars have considered the gender gap in political awareness from multiple angles to understand its complexity. One explanation identifies different levels of political interest and media attention between men and women as a cause.¹⁰ Another explanation is concerned with the different levels of human capital that men and women accumulate over the course of their lives, which they can then deploy in politics.¹¹ Others have examined gendered political socialization and gender role differences among women and men.¹² Prior research has shown that differences in the level of motivation from socialization create the basis for a lasting gender gap in political knowledge. Children learn that politics is a "man's world" and that girls frequently do not follow the attitudes and skills needed to be politically competent.¹³ Recent research into the gender gap in political knowledge has centred on methodological questions regarding the interpretation and evaluation of political knowledge. Studies indicate

⁵ Richard Niemi and Jane Junn (1998), *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁶ Althaus, Scott L., (2003), *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Delli Carpini, Michael, and Scott Keeter (2005), Gender and Political Knowledge, in Sue Tolleson-Rinehart and Jyl L. Josephson (eds), *Women, Men and the Political Process*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, pp.21-43.

⁸ Marta Fraile (2014), Do Women Know Less About Politics Than Men? The Gender Gap in Political Knowledge in Europe, *Social Politics*, 21(2).

⁹ Frazer, Elizabeth and Kenneth Macdonald (2003), Sex differences in political knowledge in Britain, *Political Studies*, 51 (1): 67-83.

¹⁰ Fraile, Marta (2013), Do Information-Rich Contexts Reduce Knowledge Inequalities? The Contextual Determinants of Political Knowledge in Europe, *Acta Politica*, 48(2): 119-43.

¹¹ Verba, Sidney, Nancy Burns, and Kay Lehman Schlozman (1997), Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement, *Journal of Politics*, 59(4): 1051-72.

¹² Kathleen Dolan (2011), Do Women and Men Know Different Things? Measuring Gender Differences in Political Knowledge, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 73, No. 1, pp. 97-107.

¹³ M. K. Jennings (1983), Gender Roles and Inequalities in Political Participation: Results from an Eight Nation Study, *Western Political Quarterly*, 36 (3), pp.364-85.

that the structure and content of questions frequently used to assess political knowledge may be skewed in favour of the political preferences of men when it comes to political knowledge in particular.¹⁴

This paper will examine the level of political awareness by gender and advance explanations which may account for disparities in political knowledge. It will also investigate whether political awareness influences political participation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design implemented in conducting this research study is outlined and explained in this section. The sample for the study is drawn using the systematic random sampling technique. For the study, 10 Assembly Constituencies has been selected. The selected assembly constituencies fall in ten out of eleven districts of Nagaland (now 12 districts as on 20/1/2021). From each selected Assembly Constituency, 3 (three) polling stations has been selected. As it is practically not possible to make direct observation of every individual in the population, a representative sample has been drawn according to accepted statistical procedures. In order to generate the target sample for the study, the study sample has been drawn from the most updated electoral rolls of the selected polling stations (2018).

The primary data was sourced through structured questionnaire of selected respondents on the basis of an interview schedule which facilitated collection of data unavailable from any other source and also facilitated collection of information

required to answer specific research questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face by trained Field Investigators and the methodology employed resulted in a response rate of 702 respondents.

MEASURES OF POLITICAL AWARENESS

Many different measures of political awareness have been employed as both independent and dependent variables; however no consensus measure of political awareness exists.¹⁵ Since political awareness covers such a wide range of topics, identifying which questions should form a political awareness scale is key. In the present study political awareness has been measured by constituting a Political Awareness Scale comprising of nine questions that tap knowledge about politics and related issues. One important consideration with the measurement of political awareness is the treatment of “don’t know” responses. Political activity is likely to be depressed among both individuals who lack the information to answer questions regarding politics and individuals who lack confidence in their knowledge of politics and thus responded “don’t know”.¹⁶ Therefore, the study chose to count a “don’t know” response as an incorrect answer and code it as a 0 in the index construction. The political awareness levels were scaled into three categories: low, moderate and high. Based on the respondent’s answers, each correct answer is counted as one point. Those respondents who scored between 1-3 points were placed in low political awareness category, those who scored between 4-6 were placed in moderate

¹⁴ Stolle, Dietlind, and Elisabeth Gidengil (2010), What Do Women Really Know? A Gendered Analysis of Varieties of Political Knowledge, *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:1, 93–109.

¹⁵ Heather L. Ondercin and Daniel Jones-White (2001), Gender Jeopardy: What is the Impact of Gender Differences in Political Knowledge on Political Participation?, *Social Science Quarterly*, 92(3), p. 678.

¹⁶ Heather L. Ondercin and Daniel Jones-White (2001), Op.cit., p.679

political awareness category and those securing 7-9 points were placed in high political awareness category.

DISCUSSION

The study indicate that majority of the women respondents are insufficiently informed about politics and related issues (Table 1). The number of women falling at the highest end (18.62%) and moderate level of the awareness scale (26.72%) is relatively few. Majority of women fall in the low political awareness category (54.66%). On the other hand, majority of male respondents are at the moderate knowledge score (36.58%) followed by high knowledge score (36.04%) and low knowledge score at 27.38 per cent.

The findings suggest that most women are poorly educated about political issues. It is quite surprising that a knowledge gap exists despite the fact that Naga women have made advances in many areas and have a similar education level as men. Education increases ones knowledge of politics; both by enhancing one's ability to acquire, organize and retain political information, and by increasing ones motivation to acquire such information.¹⁷ However, the growth in educational attainment by women in Nagaland (76.11 %) over the past decades does not seem to lead to a commensurate gain in political consciousness (Statistical Handbook of Nagaland, 2018).

(Refer Table 1)

SOURCES OF POLITICAL AWARENESS

Most scholars argue that motivation, ability and opportunity explain why some

people know more about politics than others.¹⁸ Therefore, in analyzing the sources of gender gap in political awareness variables such as political interest, education, pattern of media consumption, occupation status, place of residence and frequency of political discussion become critical areas to consider. An individual's interest in politics (motivation) is important because it is interest that motivates citizens to follow political events and acquire information. Political interest is also considered to be a consequence, as well as a cause of political activity.¹⁹ Level of political awareness may be related to how much of an interest the respondents have in politics. It is only when an individual is interested in politics that he/she may pay attention to political information and presumably will be more knowledgeable about politics. If they are not interested in politics, they may not be motivated to seek and acquire political information.²⁰

Political awareness is directly proportional to the level of educational qualification of the citizens. Many studies have found that education (ability) plays a critical role in generating political knowledge²¹ as well as explaining the gender gap in political awareness.²² Higher levels of education

¹⁸ Luskin, R. C. (1990), Explaining Political Sophistication, *Political Behavior*, 12 (4):331-61.

¹⁹ H.E Brandy, S. Verba & K.L Schlozman (1995), Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation, *American Political Science Review*, 89(2): 271-94.

²⁰ Amer.,M, (2017). Political Awareness, Political Interest and Mass Media Exposure among Youth. *Periodic Research*, VOL. -6, Issue-1. Pp.120-126.

²¹ Dow, J. K. (2009), Gender Differences in Political Knowledge: Distinguishing Characteristics-Based and Based Differences, *Political Behavior*, 31(1), 117-136.

²² Fraile, Marta (2014), Do Women Know Less About Politics Than Men? The Gender Gap in Political Knowledge in Europe, *Social Politics*, Volume 21, Number 2.

¹⁷ A.S Blinder (1973), Wage Discrimination: Reduced form and structural estimates, *The Journal of Human Resources*, Vol.8, No.4, pp.436-455.

lead to higher scores in political knowledge for both men and women.²³

Gender differences in access to media outlets, employment status and place of residence (opportunities) may also explain the gender gap in knowledge. In studies that focus on media usage and its relationship to political knowledge, researchers have found a link between increased media usage and higher levels of political knowledge.²⁴ Through media, people can learn about politics if they watch programs with political content.²⁵ Being employed is of importance for political knowledge because it exposes women and men to diverse sources of information, the potential of discussion about politics, etc.²⁶ It is held that those who are gainfully employed tend to have high levels of political interest and to be more knowledgeable about politics.²⁷ This could be due to the fact that occupation of a person is clearly related to the degree of his formal education.²⁸

²³ Stolle, Dietlind, and Elisabeth Gidengil (2010), What Do Women Really Know? A Gendered Analysis of Varieties of Political Knowledge, *Perspectives on Politics*, 8:1, 93–109.

²⁴ Vreese, Claes H. de, and Hajo Boomgaarden (2006), News, Political Knowledge and Participation: The Differential Effects of News Media Exposure on Political Knowledge and Participation, *Acta Politica*, 41(4): 317–41.

²⁵ Grönlund, Kimmo (2007), Knowing and Not Knowing: The Internet and Political Information, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 30(3): 397–418.

²⁶ Gidengil, Elisabeth, Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, Neil Nevitte, and André Blais (2005), Gender, Knowledge, and Social Capital, In *Gender and Social Capital*, New York, NY: Rutledge, 241–72.

²⁷ S.J. Rosenstone (1982), Economic Adversity and Voting Turnout, *American Journal of Political Science*, 26, (1982), p.33.

²⁸ M. L. Goel (1974), Political Participation in a Developing Nation: India, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi. In D.H. Smith (1980) et al. (eds) *Participation in Social and Political Activities*. San Francisco, Washington, London: Jossey-Bass

The urban dwellers as compared to the rural dwellers are expected to be more knowledgeable about political issues. Such a suggestion is advanced because urban areas generally have higher levels of literacy and wider mass media coverage, such as newspaper, internet and other media sources. These factors are considered important in increasing citizen's awareness about issues pertaining to politics.

For the present study factors that have been considered to explain gender gap in political awareness are political interest, educational attainment, access to media, employment status, place of residence and frequency in political discussion.

Table 2 shows that for both men and women, higher the interest in politics, higher the level of political awareness supporting the proposition that having an interest in politics does lead to an increase in political awareness. The higher the level of respondent's interest in politics the higher is their level of political awareness. An increased interest in politics appears to stimulate a growth in political awareness. On the contrary, the lower the respondents interest in politics the lower is their level of political awareness. This is because only when a person is interested in politics he or she will pay attention to political details and be more conscious of politics.

(Refer Table 2)

As the review of literature shows, being employed leads to higher level of political awareness because it exposes men and women to different sources of information. In the present study majority of the government employees fall in the high level of political awareness category as compared to those who are self employed,

cultivators and the unemployed for both genders. This could be due to the fact that occupation of a person is clearly related to the degree of his/her formal education.²⁹ In the moderate political awareness category it is the self employed who dominate the category for both male and female. And it is the unemployed male and the women cultivators who dominate the low political awareness category.

Political awareness is directly proportional to the level of educational qualification of the respondents. An increase in education does seem to be associated with an increase in political awareness of the respondents. As expected, each rise or fall in the level of education is accompanied by a corresponding rise or fall in the level of political awareness of the respondents for both the genders. Therefore, the study establishes a strong association between education and levels of political awareness.

It has also been found that those residing in urban areas have more awareness about politics and related issues than those in rural areas. This should come as no surprise as those residing in urban areas have better access to educational institutions and wider mass media coverage, such as newspaper, internet and other media sources. Both male and female respondents residing in urban areas dominate the high political awareness category. The moderate political awareness is dominated by rural male respondents and female respondents from urban areas. And the low political awareness category is dominated by the urban male and rural female respondents.

MEDIA EXPOSURE AND POLITICAL AWARENESS

Much of what citizens know about their political system, actors, and activities is

based on media representations.³⁰ It means that citizen's level of political awareness would be closely related to the degree of media consumption since people get a great deal of information on politics and related issues through different media outlets. Media exposure not only lead to an increase in political awareness but also helps to cultivate strong emotions related to political actors/issues, which guide decision making and promote political action.³¹ Thus exposure to media outlets enhances political awareness as well as induces participation in electoral activities.

With the purpose of examining the effects of media exposure on political awareness a Media Exposure Index was created which include a combination of variables on newspaper reading habits, listening to radio news, watching news on television and using internet/social networking.³² Media exposure was indexed into three categories: low for those who were sometimes exposed to any one medium only and never others, medium for those who were sometimes exposed to two or three media and high for those who were mostly exposed to three or more media.³³

(Refer Table 3)

From Table 3 it is quite evident that both men women with high media exposure

³⁰ Oluseyi Adegbola and Sherice Gearhart. (2019), Examining the Relationship Between Media Use and Political Engagement: A Comparative Study Among the United States, Kenya, and Nigeria, *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 1231–1251.

³¹ Gan, C., Lee, F. L. F., & Li, Y. (2017), Social media use, political affect, and participation among university students in urban China, *Telematics & Informatics*, 34, 936–947.

³² This index is created based on Praveen Rai's work (2017), Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India: Silent Feminisation, *South Asia Research*, 37(1), pp. 58-77.

³³ Praveen Rai (2017), Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India: Silent Feminisation, *South Asia Research*, 37(1), pp. 58-77.

²⁹ S. J. Rosenstone. (1982), Economic Adversity and Voting Turnout, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol.26, No.1, p. 33.

have high political awareness. Majority of men and women with moderate media exposure had moderate political knowledge. And as expected majority of men and women with low media exposure had low political knowledge. The above findings indicate that an increase in level of media exposure corresponds with an increase in level of political awareness.

POLITICAL DISCUSSION AND POLITICAL AWARENESS

Discussing politics with others is a matter of interest and awareness. Those who engage in political discussions with others usually show an interest in politics and some level of knowledge. Discussing politics with others allow a person to gain a wider perspective on political issues and raise awareness of the relevance of politics in their lives. The experience of discussing politics with others may also stimulate a sense of political engagement.³⁴

(Refer Table 4)

As elaborated in Table 5, a high degree of political awareness is most extensive, as expected, among men and women who discuss politics frequently. Those who engaged in political discussion sometimes have moderate political awareness while those who never engaged in political discussion have low political knowledge. From the result it can be said that frequency of political discussion is important in assisting individuals in gathering political information and increasing political knowledge.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL AWARENESS

³⁴ W. A. Galston (2001), Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, pp. 217–34.

Democratic citizens should have a minimum understanding of the political system in which they express preferences and elect representatives.³⁵ Certain level of political awareness is indispensable for voter's activity. Voters need to keep themselves informed about political issues, functions of political institutions, and more importantly their political rights and their role as political participants. It is generally assumed that higher the level of political awareness, higher would be the level of participation in electoral activities.³⁶ Therefore, it stands to reason that people who are unfamiliar with politics and related issues would be less interested to participate in electoral activities.

This section therefore examines if there is any relation between political awareness and political participation.

(Refer Table 5)

Table 5 shows that majority of women who had voted fall in the low political awareness category while the highest number of male voters has come from the moderate political awareness category. Majority of women who attended election meetings/rallies had also come from low political knowledge group while majority of men who attended election meetings/rallies had come from moderate political knowledge group. Similarly, women who took part in election campaign exhibited low political knowledge while for male voters having high awareness about politics seem to matter when it comes to taking part in

³⁵ Richard Niemi and Jane Junn, (1998), *Civic Education; What makes Students Learn*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p.1.

³⁶ Delli Carpini, Micheal X. and Scott Keeter, (1996), *what Americans Know About Politics and Why it Matters*, p.186. New Haven: Yale University Press.

campaign activities. As compared to the female respondents, high level of political awareness seems to be important for being a member of a political party for the male respondents. From the results it can be said that political awareness does not seem to be an important criterion for women to participate in electoral activities whereas having political awareness does seem to matter for men to participate in campaign activities and to be a member of a political party.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the degree and nature of political awareness by gender. A knowledge scale placed the voters in one of the three levels of political awareness scale- high, moderate and low political awareness. The study reveals that majority of men dominate the moderate political awareness category, whereas majority of women have come under the low level of knowledge score. The study found that the respondents showed differences in their level of political awareness and these differences are produced by different influences. On examination it was found that among all the factors, which account for differences in levels of political awareness educational qualification, engagement in political discussion, having political interest, occupation status, place of residence, and pattern of media use have strong impact on the amount of political information.

At the same time no positive association could be found between political awareness and political participation for the women respondents. However, having political awareness does seem to matter for men to participate in campaign activities and to be a member of a political party.

Women's minimal interest in politics, little interest to engage in political discussions and low exposure to political news broadcasts on different media outlets are

important in explaining why a majority of them are poorly informed about political matters. The level of education of Naga women is quite high (76.1%).³⁷ Such level of education is expected to lead to an increase in political awareness. However, it is surprising that just few of them are aware of events in the news and public life especially relating to politics. Certain level of political awareness is indispensable for voter's activity. Women need to keep themselves informed about political issues, functions of political institutions, and more importantly their political rights and their role as political participants. This will make them understand better and be aware of their political rights, of issues that are taking place in the political realm, who their representatives are, how the political institutions functions and the impact of public policies on their own interest. This may lead them to develop an interest to participate more in the political process, i.e., if their level of political awareness is high, it is more likely that they would be politically active in a range of electoral activities.

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³⁷ Statistical Handbook of Nagaland, Government of Nagaland, 2011.

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Table 1: Political Awareness Index (In percentage)

Gender	Political Awareness Scale		
	High	Moderate	Low
Men	36.04	36.58	27.38
Women	18.62	26.72	54.66

Source: Field work, 2019

Table 2: Sources of Political Awareness (In percentage)

Factors	Political Awareness Scale					
	Men			Women		
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low
Great interest in politics	59.25	37.05	3.70	66.68	16.66	16.66
Some interest in politics	39.36	36.57	24.07	44.25	23	32.75
Not interest in politics	25.39	36.52	38.09	11.21	28.97	59.82
Govt employee	54.44	27.84	17.72	55.88	29.42	14.70
Self employed	26.38	48.62	25	11.12	51.85	37.03
Cultivator	26.05	38.54	35.41	8.33	8.33	83.34
Unemployed	28.68	33.60	37.70	16.50	28.30	55.18
Illiterate	31.57	10.52	57.89	3.33	3.33	93.33
Under Matric	25.85	32.65	41.49	8.10	17.56	74.32
Matriculate	29.41	48.52	22.05	16.66	24.07	59.25
Higher Secondary	48.95	38.29	12.76	49.20	38.10	12.70
Graduate	64.44	33.34	2.22	50	11.76	38.25
Post Graduate & above	81.82	9.09	9.09	66.66	16.67	16.67
Urban	37.22	31.39	31.39	47.58	27.58	24.84
Rural	35.35	39.65	25	13.84	26.06	60.10

Source: Field work, 2019

Table 3: Media Exposure and Political Awareness (In percentage)

Media Exposure	Political Awareness Scale					
	Men			Women		
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low
High	60.72	30.36	8.92	51.03	32.65	16.32
Moderate	34.56	41.70	23.69	26.75	45.35	27.90
Low	24.75	29.70	45.55	7.07	17.17	75.76

Source: Field work, 2019

Table 4: Political Discussion and Political Awareness (In percentage)

Frequency of Political Discussion	Political Awareness Scale					
	Men			Women		
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low
Never	7.32	43.90	48.78	9.67	29.03	61.30
Sometimes	13.67	60.44	25.89	23.26	51.48	23.26
Frequently	50	30	20	42.86	28.57	28.57

Source: Field work, 2019

Table 5: Political Participation and Political Awareness (In percentage)

Political Participation	Political Awareness Scale					
	Men			Women		
	High	Moderate	Low	High	Moderate	Low
Voting	35.72	36.57	27.71	15.98	27.56	56.46
Attending election meetings/rallies	39.78	40.90	19.32	23.48	25.22	51.30
Election campaign	44.30	34.18	21.52	32.82	29.68	37.5
Membership in political parties	50	25.92	18.52	21.22	18.18	60.60

Source: Field work, 2019

