

# Similarities and Differences of Gender Participation in Politics

--Viewing the autonomy of Zhejiang village from the perspective of feminism

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## **I. The similarity of gender participation in politics: the Convergence of Election Awareness**

In comparison with men to women's understanding and awareness of election , we understand women's election awareness by comparing with men two aspects of election activity: the knowledge about voting and the motivation of election. These two aspects reflect women's awareness of political participation and how much independence they gain in it, including the recognition of privileges and obligations in political affairs. This can reflect to what extents they can exceed traditional gender concepts controlled by patriarchy, which is an important reference to observe rural women's independent mind in politics.

### **Similarity of understanding and motivation**

First, the awareness and the independence of female political participation are learnt by comparison with men from the angle of voting understandings between two sexes. From the survey data, women tend to have more understandings on the election and clearer consciousness than men do. Viewed overall, however, the extent of women's consciousness is a little lower than that of men's.

Second. Motivation to participate is a complicated question. Different answers can be obtained from different angles. What is the crux of women's motivation in political participation is who will be elected as the head of villagers committees and why the villagers vote to the elected head of villagers committee. In order to know the election motivation of women villagers, we used the question "What are the standards to

choose the head of villagers' committee?" as main reference...

The results of investigation show that there's no big difference between women's answers and men's answers. Both women and men answered "she or he could lead the people to prosperity". This answer accounts for almost the same proportion between men and women. It indicates that the motivation of men and women who participate in the election is economic interests. This answer shows that economy is the main agent for the village autonomy as well as the motivation of female political participation. Women's politics independency is almost the same as men's. In choosing the answer to "Speaking for common people", the number of women is 4.7% lower than the number of men. In the selection of "Working for the Party", 37.1% of men chose this one. Women also take up almost the same percentage as men.

We undertake various kinds of interviews to further exemplify the authenticity and reliability of the survey.

It can be seen from the results of survey and the interviews that women's participation in autonomy is basically a kind of independent behavior. They have clearer mind in using their own political rights. Deeper analysis of consciousness may be unsatisfactory. But from the answers to the questionnaires and the face-to-face interviews, we could feel that they are telling the truth.

### **The Cause of Similarity**

What are the causes for the convergence in consciousness and independence of men and women? The general causes can be obtained from the macro-background of the politics and economic reform. But it cannot reveal the gender root of why women

transform their political identity. Women live in the "private area" set by men for a long time. From this angle, the awakening of their political awareness in the village autonomy is directly attributed to the shock of traditional patriarchy caused by system transformation after democratic reform.

## **II. The Disparity of Gender Participation in Politics: A Contrast with the Election Result**

There is no doubt that the understanding and motivation of political participation is an important reference to define the extent of rural women's involvement in the politics. But without the survey on the actual political participation among women, the actual effect and position that women take is still unknown. Therefore, we pay close attention to women's position in actual power structure. From the collected data, women are not as equal as men in real power structure. Obviously women are in a hobble, which contrasts sharply with their comparatively independent participation awareness.

### **The Edged Position in the Political Power Structure**

First, the quantity is absolutely small. In the villagers committee involved in our research, woman is numerically a minority of villagers in the committee, which is not in accordance with their man-like election awareness. This is the biggest difference between rural men and rural women in the process of political participation.

Second, the subordinate role. Among the 111 directors of villages who took our survey, there is only one woman director of a village, which only takes up 0.9% of the number of village directors. It is in great disparity with the number of men directors.

In the investigated area, there are three popular slogans: "Promote Democracy", "Do Everything in Accordance with the Law" and "Uphold the Party's Leadership". There

are many specific requirements under the guideline of "Uphold Party's Leadership". For example, the committee should recruit more young people; candidates above certain age are not allowed to be a part of committee. The candidates should be educated and the committee should absorb a certain number of women. Generally speaking, the villagers would not oppose to recruiting a woman in voting. But this woman is generally identified to be responsible for the stuffs like family planning. So every village usually has one woman commissioner, who is responsible for family planning, health care and so on. In many villages, woman commissioners also work as cashier.

### **The Cause of the Contrast**

Obviously, the actual position of women in the process of political participation is not satisfactory. It doesn't match women's political initiatives. It is complicated to explain the contrast. The "gender neutral" study on village autonomy often blame this on the inefficient political ability of women. But they neglect that the gender system is responsible for the inefficient political ability of women. From the standpoint of women, problems which the general research can't find will be exposed. Susan Okin once said the issue on subordinate status among gender, women and family should be investigated from the points which have been said or not said, but also from the hinted thinking. In this way, we can see that on the one hand, traditional male- dominated society moulds women according to men's needs and values and develops their abilities to participate in private activities. On the other hand, men do this to outline women's inability in politics and exclude women from the political area. The marginalized position of women's rank in the actual political system is just from the gender system controlled by men.

First, the blind area of gender legislation under the patriarchal system. The Provision

9 of the Organic Law of the Villagers committee provides that a villagers committee shall include an appropriate number of women. This provision is of importance because it calls for the due political right of women which is stripped for a long time. It is a great shock to the tradition which neglects women's participation in political activities, and it embodies the impartiality of the system to some extent. But this kind of impartiality is only confined to the obvious blind area of gender." The appropriate number" is not made for women who actually are at disadvantageous position. It's an ambiguous statement which doesn't clearly indicate how many women should be included in the villagers committee and in what way the "appropriate number" is guaranteed. From the actual results, this provision doesn't enhance women's political position essentially. Judging from the standpoint of women, this vague provision is made to achieve formal gender balance by showing the cares towards women from the standpoint of men. What they need is only a woman who can be responsible for the family planning. Consequently, the proportion of women falls into neglect when this law is enforced. The Organic Law provides that it is the duty of party committee of the town to direct the election process of villagers committee. In the villages and towns which are involved in our research, the party committees did carry out this duty. But they mainly focus on the confirmation of the candidates of the head of villages. As for what proportion women should take up and what role women should play, the party committees usually confirm one woman who is responsible for the family planning. The issue on the quantity of woman representatives is not enlisted as the first priority when the Organic Law is enforced by the government at the grass root level and the party committees. The overlook in executing the law makes it hard to enhance women's proportion in the political system.

Judging The Organic Law from the perspective of conventional patriarchy, this law is a historical progress. Even though people see defects when putting this law in practice, patriarchal character is the last defect they would think of. They all overjoyed about the provision on the number of women. But they neglected the root

of gender behind this provision. Even the scholars would like to conclude that this is a huge progress compared with the society where men are superior to women. But this law makes no difference for the women of political ambitions. It's more or less the same as the rule that every production brigade should have one woman official during the period of planned economy. It proves that in the Chinese villages, which has been under patriarchy controlled for a long term, only the general provision of "appropriate number" will not change women's political positions. The law should include how to guarantee the "appropriate number" and the detailed quantity. From our research materials, the realization of the "appropriate number" usually refers to only one woman. Many people would say this result is attributed to the law. But in reality, this law is not enough to raise the level of women political participation. So the election, every year, proportion in the distribution of the gender remains the same.

Second, division of work by gender and role expectation. In the villages of our country, the view of "Men are superior to women" goes deep into women's characters as well as men's values. By promoting autonomy system, women realize they have equal rights as men through their practice of politics participation. According to the views of psychology of learning, people can be acquainted with the knowledge of democracy in a short period. But their inner character and value is impossible to be changed in a short time. It takes a considerable long road from knowing one's democratic rights to carrying out his democratic rights. In this aspect, rural women get more difficulties than rural men to conquer. It's impossible for them to break away from the subordinating psychology in the recent twenty years. That is because of the role expectation towards women in the patriarchal society.

Women are expected to behave as "an understanding wife and loving mother" in the traditional society. Compared with urban women, rural women are more inclined to accept this definition of role. They tend to follow predecessors' words because their

limited living environment and limited social sphere narrow their visions. Once they accept certain concepts and standards, they will obey it in consistency. Men always hope that women follow the traditional rule. Since the democratic reformation, women get equal chances as men in economic activities. But it is still difficult for men to recognize women's political ability and be willing to be ruled by women. In villages, the concept that "Men are supreme" is still the dominating value of men. Even though women aware of their own political rights, this awareness comes first as the enlightenment of self-consciousness, not as the enlightenment of political awareness of a woman. Compared with the situations in feudal society and planned economy, the awakening of women's political awareness which is also the enlightenment of individual awareness is a historical progress and prerequisite for women political awareness. But that's not women's political awareness in a complete sense. It just refracts men's ideology. In the interview research, we asked them a question." Why were there not women director in the previous villagers committee?" Most of them answered "Women are not capable" or "This is men's business".

The first answer may embody the correct election awareness of women. That is, they would rather vote to the more capable candidates. But the problem is why men are considered to be more capable than women. The second answer illustrates why women did not develop their political ability. The role expectation of women in both traditional and modern societies is to be a housewife, a person who takes care of husbands and kids. This society expectation demands women to mould themselves according to men's needs. During the process of grown-up, they developed the abilities which are fit in family life, giving birth and tendering people. Consequently, women themselves also look down upon their political ability, which laid restraints on developing their political ability. Subordinate conscious are deeply rooted in their values. Once they get married, their first choice is to manage family affairs and assist their husbands. The sense of responsibility in marriage and mothering easily make them lost interest in something else other than family affairs. Or they have interests in

doing something beside family affairs, but don't have time and energy to pay attention to. As time passes, they not only depend on their husband psychologically, but also lost their due ability in political participation.

Even though women possess strong ability in political participation, they would not concentrate on work like men because they feel like going against the traditional role expectation. We learnt from our investigations that there is a village called XiShenLi village which is always in disorder and has weak economy. The town official takes up the place of the secretary of the village. When the new round of election came this year, party committee of the town chose the head of department of women affairs as the secretary of the village after thorough consideration. They invested many time to persuade this woman and satisfied many requirements she raised. But she was quitted after less than a month. She went to her husband's building site in Shanghai. The reason lies in the objection of her parents-in-law. It is a common scene in the villages. Many women who hold the important positions in the villages face the pressure from family in varying degrees. It's hard to seek the support from husbands and parents-in-law. This is the result of long-term gender distribution of work.

Again, double mass political participation psychology. Women have been at subordinate position for a long time, which prevents them from fully developing political talent and participating in political activities and directly causes their abnormal psychology in participating politics. And women follow the public opinion and attach to the family. They don't have enough confidence in political activities. Unlike men, women lack yearning desire to be elected into villagers committee. Their insight is so narrow that they can not seek the potential qualified woman candidates and vote to them.

From what we observe, women are more likely to be influenced by people and the

public opinion during the voting. In another word, they follow other people's opinion. On the other hand, they will vote according to what the men of their family say. The impact is direct and efficient. They value highly their male family member's views, especially on the issue of "who to choose". Even when they fill in our questionnaire, they are always inclined to turn to their husbands, their fathers and their brothers for help. Some simply ask the male family members to fill in for them. When we distributed the questionnaire, we noticed that women usually would not reply to the questionnaire immediately. They tended to fill in the questionnaire when their male family members came back. They feel relieved after asking their husbands' opinions.

By comparison, men are also susceptible to the mass opinion. For example, they also pry about different choices. They make a final decision on who to vote after discussing with other people. But when this opinion with mass character is taken home, it will change into a mind of family. It directly affects other family members' choices, especially women's choices. Women become double dependent. They follow public opinion as well as their husbands' mind. In return, this kind of double subordinate psychology will directly affect the distribution of the gender candidates. When men vote to the male villagers, women follow their votes. They even neglect women candidates who have the ability to manage the work of villagers committee, which results in fewer women candidates in the process. In this double attachment behavior of women, they learn to evaluate women's political ability according to men's standards. In the end, they form a mind set that women are less competent than men, which in return restrains the initiatives of women's political participation and their confidence. It's not good for women to change their political positions.

Based on this theory, many scholars believe that women are instinctive, intuitive and emotional. They should obey men's orders because they are unqualified to participate in the politics. From women's view, the analytic psychology can not blame on the

gender defect of women. It can not simply be attributed to women's naive ignorance and inability. On the other hand, we should learn that the oppression from patriarchal system leads to women's unhealthy political participation psychology. Patriarchy cultivates women's dependency and subordinate status towards men. Historically, the traditional gender distribution system of work confined women to the failure. They are susceptible to men's will, and men can represent them to carry out political rights and political obligations. In reality, they learn that men and women both have equal political rights, but they are excluded by the patriarchy-oriented society from real political area, which makes women hard to avoid obeying men and depending on men.

### **III. Conclusion**

Through the comparison of the similarities and differences of gender political participation in the villages' self-governance, it can be seen that the female political participation motivation which is more or less the same as that of male benefits from the restructuring of rural society. Family role of rural women has already been changed which leads to the awakening of women's self-motivation. This is just the prerequisite of gender equity in politics. However, the disparity of the actual political positions between men and women reflects that patriarchy still controls the political practices in the villages. Women are prevented from entering political fields because of unfair legislative system, discriminated distribution of work, the role expectation of men towards women and the double analytic psychology in participating politics. We have to say this is a lack of prerequisite to the women's equity in participation. And this is just the topic which the village autonomy should extend and probe into. This article only raises the issue and presents a rough analysis. "How to broaden the research on rural women in theory" is a question we still need to think in the future.

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