

Conflict and Gender Norms: Evidence from India

Mark Dincecco (Michigan), James Fenske (Warwick),
Bishnupriya Gupta (Warwick), Anil Menon (UC Merced)

We study the relationship between exposure to historical conflict involving heavy weaponry and the emergence and endurance of male-favoring gender norms. We argue that the physical nature of such conflict produced cultural norms that favor males and male offspring. To evaluate this, we focus on spatial variation in gender norms across India, a dynamic developing economy in which gender inequality remains acute. Prior to European colonization, interstate military competition and warfare were prevalent in India. We show that areas with high exposure to precolonial conflict are significantly more likely to practice traditional male-favoring norms as measured by male-biased sex ratios and crimes against women. We document how male-favoring folkloric traditions, the gender identity of Hindu temple deities, and male-biased marriage practices have helped transmit these norms over time. Our results shed light on a static mismatch by which the rigidity of male favoring norms enables them to endure, even in a rapidly growing economy.