

ROOTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY: Evidence from 450 years of Portuguese colonialism in India

Educational gender gaps can be closed within a few decades through government efforts, but deeply rooted preferences for sons over daughters seem to be impossible to overcome. That is the gloomy conclusion of research by **Alexander Lehner**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019. His study uses a historical quasi-natural experiment in the Indian state of Goa, and documents how attitudes towards women shifted over the course of several centuries.

Male-biased sex ratios are currently one of the most pressing global demographic problems. The most affected places are China and the South Asian subcontinent. In India alone, there are at present more than 60 million women missing and around two million 'go missing' every year. Girls are neglected and inadequately fed, but the biggest chunk is explained by the abortion of female foetuses despite anti-abortion laws being in place.

This is not just a problem that exclusively applies to certain geographical regions. Migrants coming from cultures with a deeply rooted preference for sons tend to bring these attitudes into their host countries.

This study uses a historical quasi-natural experiment in the Indian state of Goa, and documents how attitudes towards women shifted over the course of several centuries.

The findings suggest that educational gender gaps can be closed within a few decades through government efforts, but deeply rooted preferences for sons seem to be impossible to overcome. The study thus concludes – given there are no radical changes in approaches on how to tackle female infanticide – that missing women are going to stay a massive global demographic problem for a long time to come.

The study documents the persistent effect of Portuguese (Catholic) colonialism in a South Asian context. It uses Goa as a 'lab' in order to study a set of questions that pertain mostly to the roots of gender inequality and related issues regarding male favouritism and educational gender inequality in India.

In some parts of Goa, the colonisers forbade sati (a practice that requires a widow to be burned alive on the pyre of her husband), polygamy and childhood marriage; they also gave women property rights around 500 years ago. Furthermore Catholic missionaries brought structured education.

Due to two 'accidents in history' in the mid-eighteenth century, all these actions were undertaken only in a very distinct part of the current area of Goa: the Catholic orders were forbidden by a papal bull in Rome and roughly at the same time the territory could be expanded fortuitously.

These so-called 'New Conquests' were never entered by missionaries and were granted religious freedom. They thus retained their Hindu identity, a fact that persists until today and therefore makes them a 'representative sample' of the rest of India.

To move towards a causal interpretation, away from plain correlations in the data, the research redraws the line in space that historically demarcated the 'Old Conquests' from the 'New Conquests' and applies a so-called spatial regression discontinuity design (spatial RDD).

This means that instead of analysing all of Goa, the research only looks at villages that are near this historical, now meaningless border. As villages on either side are geographically very close to each other and have always been treated uniformly by the government, they are highly comparable when it comes to fundamentals and features from 'first nature geography' (rainfall, soil, climate, etc.). The analysis of night-time satellite images suggests that income is also roughly the same on both sides.

The study thus provides strong evidence that the early Portuguese colonial activities were the cause of (geographically) sharp within differences that are still measurable today in terms of male-biased sex ratios and gender gaps in education. Looking at different censuses across time, it finds that the latter converge, but preferences for sons do not seem to change at all.

The research thus identifies outcomes that have differential degrees of persistence within the same quasi-experimental setting. Due to the identification strategy, this effect can be traced back to culture, as institutions and other observables are constant across the RDD border.

In addition to the time component, the study also finds tentative evidence for horizontal diffusion through space: also Hindus and Muslims within the 'Old Conquests' exhibit systematically lower educational gender gaps. For the preference for sons, there is no such effect.

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