

# THE LONG-TERM EFFECT OF DEMOGRAPHIC SHOCKS ON THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER ROLES: EVIDENCE FROM THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

---

**Edoardo Teso**

Harvard University, and IQSS.

## **Abstract**

Can demographic shocks affect the long-run evolution of female labor force participation and gender norms? This paper traces current variation in women's participation in the labor force within Sub-Saharan Africa to the emergence of a female-biased sex ratio during the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. This historical shock affected the division of labor along gender lines in the remaining African population, as women substituted for the missing men by taking up areas of work that were traditionally male tasks. By exploiting variation in the degree to which different ethnic groups were affected by the transatlantic slave trade, I show that women whose ancestors were more exposed to this shock are today more likely to be in the labor force, have lower levels of fertility, and are more likely to participate in household decisions. The marriage market and the cultural transmission of internal norms across generations represent important mechanisms explaining this long-run persistence. (JEL: J16, N37, Z13)

---

---

*The editor in charge of this paper was Paola Giuliano.*

Acknowledgments: I thank Paola Giuliano and three anonymous referees, as well as Alberto Alesina, Oded Galor, Claudia Goldin, Richard Hornbeck, Fernanda Márquez-Padilla, Stelios Michalopoulos, Nathan Nunn, Rohini Pande, Andrei Shleifer, and seminar participants at Brown, Harvard, the 2014 NEUDC conference, and the 2015 DEVPEC conference for helpful comments and suggestions. I thank Marta Reynal-Querol and Nathan Nunn for sharing data. All mistakes are my sole responsibility.

E-mail: [eteso@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:eteso@fas.harvard.edu)