Kinship Structure and the Family Evidence from the Matrilineal Belt

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Kinship structure varies across societies and may affect incentives for cooperation within the household. A key source of variation in kinship structure is whether lineage and inheritance are traced through women, as in matrilineal kinship systems, or men, as in patrilineal kinship systems. Anthropologists hypothesize that matrilineal kinship benefits women because they have greater support from their kin and husbands have less authority over their wives. However, these factors may reduce cooperation within the nuclear household. I test these hypotheses using a geographic regression discontinuity design along the matrilineal belt, which describes the distribution of matrilineal kinship across sub-Saharan Africa. Using over 50 DHS survey-waves with more than 400,000 respondents, I find that matrilineal women are less likely to believe domestic violence is justified, experience less domestic violence, and have greater autonomy in decision making – particularly in the ability to visit family and seek healthcare. Additionally, matrilineal kinship closes the education gap between male and female children, and matrilineal children experience health benefits. Using original survey and experimental data from couples along the matrilineal belt, I test how matrilineal kinship structure affects spousal cooperation. Matrilineal women contribute less to a public good with a spouse when it is easier to hide income. The results highlight how broader social structures shape women’s empowerment, investment in children, and cooperation in the household.

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