Kinship Structure and the Family Evidence from the Matrilineal Belt

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Kinship structure – how extended families are organized – varies across societies and may have implications for outcomes 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 hypothesized that matrilineal kinship systems benefit women because they have greater support from their kin and husbands have less authority over their wives. However, they believed these same factors may also reduce spousal cooperation. I test these hypotheses using OLS and a geographic regression discontinuity design along the matrilineal belt in Africa. Using over 50 DHS survey-waves, I find that matrilineal women experience less domestic violence and have greater autonomy in decision making. Additionally, matrilineal kinship closes the education gap between male and female children, and matrilineal children experience health benefits. To better understand the specific mechanisms behind these effects, I collect original survey and experimental data from along the matrilineal belt. Men and women from matrilineal ethnic groups cooperate less with their spouses in a lab experiment. This is particularly the case for matrilineal women when they have the opportunity to hide income from their spouse. The results highlight how broader social structures shape key outcomes within the domestic sphere.

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