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# Social constraints and women's education: Evidence from Afghanistan under radical religious rule

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## ABSTRACT

**Noury, Abdul G., and Speciale, Biagio**—Social constraints and women's education: Evidence from Afghanistan under radical religious rule

We analyze how growing up under *Taliban* rule affects Afghan women's educational attainments and subsequent labor market and fertility outcomes. While in power from 1996 to 2001, the *Taliban* ruled a large portion of the Afghan territory and introduced a ban on girls' education. Using data from the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment survey, we rely on the fact that, depending on their year of birth and province of residence, individuals differed in the number of years they were exposed to the *Taliban* government while of school age. Our difference-in-differences estimates show that an additional year of exposure to the *Taliban* occupation while of school age reduces a woman's probability of completing basic education by about two percentage points. The effects on educational outcomes are larger in Pashtun districts and rural areas. These findings are not due to the 1992 introduction of the provisional Islamist government that preceded the *Taliban*, cultural differences related to ethnicity, or varying emigration rates across provinces. The estimates are robust to differences across provinces in the number of violent events before, during, and after the *Taliban* occupation. Women exposed to the *Taliban's* radical religious rule while they were of school age are also less likely to be employed outside of the household and more likely to have an agricultural job within the household. For fertility choices, exposure to the *Taliban* occupation increases total number of children and lowers age at first marriage. We discuss our empirical findings against theoretical economic literature on radical religious groups (e.g., Iannaccone, 1992; Berman, 2000). *Journal of Comparative Economics* 44(4) (2016) 821–841. New York University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Paris School of Economics - Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France.

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## 1. Introduction

In several developing countries, socioeconomic and cultural constraints severely reduce women's human capital investment. Parental attitudes towards their daughters' education, early marriage, childbearing, and expectations about

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discriminatory employment practices are examples of such constraints. Religion and religious rules represent other factors that may influence gender inequalities in education. In this paper, we explore the effects of radical religious rules on women's human capital investment and subsequent labor market outcomes and fertility choices. We focus on Afghanistan and study the consequences women experienced because of constraints imposed by the *Taliban*, a political and religious group that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. During its regime, the *Taliban* banned girls from going to school and women from working outside the home (Rashid, 2000).<sup>1</sup> After the *Taliban* was removed from power in 2001, they regrouped as an insurgency movement and targeted several girls' schools, their students, and their teachers in violent attacks (for instance, see the *Guardian*, 2011b and Larson, 2009).

An emerging economic literature has examined the functioning of radical religious groups.<sup>2</sup> According to this research, in weak institutional contexts, radical religious groups may become major suppliers of both political action and social services such as public safety measures, education, justice, and health outcomes. Besides the *Taliban* in Afghanistan, important examples of such groups include *Hamas* in the Gaza Strip and *Hezbollah* in Lebanon. These three groups have the commonality of being radical religious militant groups that turned violent; all three groups also try to rule countries characterized by poor governance. There are, however, several aspects in which they differ. One important difference is that the *Taliban* was an efficient provider of public safety, while the *Hamas* and *Hezbollah* were providers of education and health (for instance, see the *Financial Times*, 2013). A possible reason for these specializations in providing public goods is demand-based. To increase support for their respective groups, the *Taliban*, *Hamas*, and *Hezbollah* chose to provide the public good that was highly demanded by the people in their country. There may have been a higher demand for education in Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza than in Afghanistan, because Afghanistan had a much lower GDP per capita, more people living in rural areas, and less infrastructure than these other areas. Since education is a normal good, the demand for education increases with income (see, among others, Jacoby, 1994). Conversely, in a country such as Afghanistan, which has suffered several decades of war, the demand for public safety is higher. People in poorer and more unstable regions demand more public safety services than people in more developed regions because they face more social problems (Boustan, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

The club framework—which is used in the literature on radical religious groups and presents voluntary religious organizations as efficient providers of public goods—predicts that the threat of group members' defection can rationally explain episodes of destructive behavior and gratuitous cruelty, such as the subjugation of women and minorities by the *Taliban* in Afghanistan (Berman and Laitin, 2008; Berman, 2009). These restrictions on behavior can target both a club's own members (Iannaccone, 1992) as well as outsiders. The latter argument has been proposed by Berman (2009), who explains that the abuse and repression of the population in Afghanistan improved the *Taliban's* control over their own governors and troops, preventing members' defection by limiting their options for fraternizing with outsiders.

Despite the rapid increase of recent literature on these topics, we know little about general life under radical religious rules. Empirical investigations of the economic consequences of social constraints imposed by radical religious groups are rare. This is unfortunate, as radical groups such as the *Taliban* in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as Al-Shabab in Somalia control important parts of these territories.<sup>4</sup> The current Obama administration and the Afghan government consider talking with the *Taliban* and potentially sharing power with them as viable strategies for achieving a more peaceful end to war in Afghanistan (*New York Times*, 2012).<sup>5</sup> According to recent estimates, the *Taliban* controls about one-fifth of Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in addition to analyzing the functioning of radical groups, it is important to empirically examine the economic consequences of their rules on the targeted groups.

In this paper, we consider one of the most striking examples of social constraint and destructive behavior associated with a radical religious group: the subjugation of women by the *Taliban* during their government in Afghanistan. There are at least two possible reasons for such actions. First, to establish group cohesion on the battlefield and lower the outside option of members' defection, the *Taliban* restricted women's access to education and other public goods (see Berman and Laitin, 2008; Berman, 2009; and our discussion above). Second, such behavior may have been adopted for ideological reasons, as the *Taliban* is influenced by the religious thought of Deobandi,<sup>7</sup> a movement within Sunni

<sup>1</sup> This is, however, a controversial question: according to a former high-ranking *Taliban* official who served as Afghanistan's ambassador to Pakistan in 2001, the movement was not against educating women, and the ban on girls' schools was only a "temporary measure" (see the *Guardian*, 2011a).

<sup>2</sup> See Iannaccone (1992), Berman (2000), Berman (2003), Berman and Stepanyan (2004), Caplan (2006), Iannaccone and Berman (2006), Jaeger and Paserman (2006), Benmelech and Berrebi (2007), Berman and Laitin (2008), Berman (2009), Gould and Klor (2010), Jaeger et al. (2012), Makowsky (2012), and McBride and Richardson (2012), among others. Following Berman and Laitin (2008), radical religious groups can be defined as groups that distance themselves from the mainstream culture by creating some sort of tension.

<sup>3</sup> A testable implication of this argument is that both geographical differences in violence and economic development—for instance, the urban versus rural divide—may play a role in explaining the behavior of radical religious groups. We consider both dimensions in our empirical analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Given our focus on the effects on women, the most pertinent examples of radical religious groups more similar to the *Taliban* in their views of women's role in society are ultra-radical Sunni sects such as Al-Shabab, the governments in the Northwest Frontier Provinces and Baluchistan in Pakistan, and the various Al Qaeda sects in parts of Africa. For the literature on the effects of programs that aim at improving the status of women, see Beaman et al. (2012) and Jensen (2012) on India; Duflo et al. (2012) on Kenya; Beath et al. (2013) for Afghanistan; Bandiera et al. (2014) for Uganda.

<sup>5</sup> Several analysts have documented that the *Taliban* moderated their behavior after 2001. A shift in attitude may have occurred with regard to female education as well (Brahimi, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> See the *New York Times* (2016).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Maley (1998).

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