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Worth Fighting For: Daughters Improve their Mothers' Autonomy in South Asia

Rachel Heath and Xu Tan*

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Abstract

In South Asia, parents prize sons for both economic and cultural reasons, and having a son is often thought to improve his mother's status within the household. However, using data from Bangladesh and India, we show that such high regard does not necessarily translate into improved autonomy for her. In fact, a daughter raises her mother's participation in household decisions and her freedom of mobility relative to a son. A daughter also prompts her mother to work more, but not necessarily to consume more. These effects are strongest among mothers of older girls. These results are consistent with a theoretical model in which mothers have greater relative preferences for spending on their daughters than fathers do, and so seek more autonomy to direct resources to their daughters.

Keywords: Female autonomy, child gender, intra-household bargaining, female labor supply

JEL codes: J22, O12, J16, D13

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