Gender After Genocide:
How Violence Shapes Long-Term Political Representation*

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Abstract

What are the legacies of violence on women's political representation? We examine the long-term effects of a watershed conflict of the twentieth century: the Khmer Rouge genocide, during which 50–70% of Cambodia's working-age men were killed. Using original data on mass killings and economic and political conditions in Cambodian communes, we find that genocide exposure is positively associated with women's economic advancement and present-day indicators of women's representation in local-level elected office. We conduct in-depth, ethnographic interviews with genocide survivors to explore the mechanisms by which violence spurred women into elected office. A crucial finding emerges: In areas that suffered the genocide's worst killings, widows obtained economic autonomy, providing a template for the economic advancement of women in traditional households with surviving men. The shift in norms regarding the sexual division of labor and its transmission through intra-communal and intergenerational pathways allowed women to adopt larger public roles over time.

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A growing body of literature has found that war produces large-scale social transformations that profoundly shape how women interact with the state and think about politics.[1] The violent breakdown of social order in wartime can displace women and fuel male aggression against them, leading some to withdraw from political activity and others to mobilize into activist groups.[2] Other women fill the public roles vacated by husbands and fathers when they go off to fight, introducing them to experiences of empowerment.[3] The political legacy of this second group of women is the focus of this paper. While war can create political and economic opportunities for women during the course of conflict, it is unclear whether these opportunities persist well beyond the end of the conflict that produced them. How long, in what form, and through what mechanisms do these effects persist?

Political economists have noted that the military deployment and disproportionate death of men can alter female attitudes and behavior. World War II, for instance, created an epochal change in the American labor force. The experience of wartime work changed female preferences; in states with greater mobilization of men during the war, women continued to work in greater numbers through the 1950s and 1960s.[4] Similarly, case studies of civil wars in Liberia, Uganda, and Angola reveal that when women replaced men as primary breadwinners in the family, they learned how to mobilize and organize, eventually rising to positions of power in companies, religious institutions, and parent-teacher associations.[5] However, such effects are sometimes short-lived. In the United States, the majority of women drawn into the labor force by World War II had left by 1947.[6] Once the Bosnian War was over, voters did not seem favorable to female political candidates when male

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[1] E.g., Hadzic and Tavits 2019; Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017; Cohen 2016.
[2] Bateson 2012.
[3] Tripp 2015.
[4] Acemoglu, Autor, and Lyle 2004.
[5] Tripp 2015.
[6] Goldin 1991.

options were provided.[7] As Tripp notes, "it is unclear how long this period of gender-related reform in post-conflict countries will continue."[8] Where, when, and how violence leads to lasting female empowerment remain important open questions.

Much of the existing research focuses on the immediate changes in women's attitudes about their opportunities: how a woman's own preferences, skills, and expectations are transformed when she takes on a job historically seen as appropriate for men only. Less is known about the extent to which wartime female empowerment changes the attitudes and behaviors of other community members—the men and women who remain in traditional domestic structures, whose social expectations define appropriate female behavior in the political domain.[9]

In this article, we present a new theoretical perspective, tied to one consequential way in which war can impact patriarchal cultural norms. We argue that high wartime male death tolls can foreshadow long-term changes in norms regarding the gendered division of labor in households.[10] When large numbers of widowed women spend less time on housework and more time on external economic activities, their behaviors are emulated by women in male-headed households and accepted by surviving men. Culturally, it becomes permissible for contemporary and subsequent generations of women to take on larger economic roles. Out of contexts of widespread death and trauma can emerge new incentives and opportunities for women to run for political office. War consequently changes community-wide expectations for female behavior, not only for the women who lose husbands or fathers to violence, but also for those in households with surviving men.

Measuring and assessing cultural shifts caused by conflict poses a significant empirical challenge: without identifying variation in the factors that open opportunity structures for women,

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[7] Hadzic and Tavits 2020.
[8] Tripp 2015, 256.
[9] Hadzic and Tavits 2019.
[10] Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006.

it is difficult to conclude whether progressive patterns of political behavior are caused by wartime female economic empowerment. We investigate the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, in which an estimated 50–70% of the country's working-age men were killed.[11] Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge ran a totalitarian government that intended to eliminate traces of decadent capitalism and transform the country into a utopian nation that was in Pol Pot's words, "collectivist, uncorrupt, equal, and prosperous." But their radical agrarian reforms and strict communist work camps ravaged the country, resulting in the starvation and execution of 1.7 million people in a population of less than ten million. Such extensive loss of male life allows for the factors opening opportunities for women to be more confidently identified.

Our contention is that areas that suffered the most killings during the genocide should have registered the largest uptick in female economic empowerment, both in households affected by male deaths and in the broader community, enhancing women's political representation in the long term. We test this argument with a multi-methods research design, making use of historical ethnographic accounts, personal in-depth interviews with genocide survivors, and an original dataset of geo-referenced mass graves.[12] Specifically, we draw on fieldwork and historical reporting to illustrate the transformation of pre-genocide patriarchal domestic structures, demonstrating how women now living near former Khmer Rouge killing sites are less constrained than women elsewhere in the country by traditional social expectations. Then, we use large-*n*, within-country variation in local female representation to determine whether the patterns we observe are generalizable across the universe of local governments in Cambodia. Using original data on local-level killings during the Khmer Rouge genocide, we study how wartime violence impacts long-term trends in women's economic autonomy both in widowed households and in

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[11] Jacobs 2020.
[12] Mahoney 2010; Straus 2007.

traditional dual-parent households, affecting in turn women's decisions to run for and win elected office.

We find that communities exposed to more violence during the genocide feature significantly narrower gender gaps in local politics today. Women in these communities are substantially more likely to seek and win election to local political office than those in communities that escaped the worst of Khmer Rouge violence. Unlike scholarly accounts that highlight the importance of institutional design and international actors, we uncover evidence that these behaviors are transmitted through mechanisms of community socialization. Women in the communities that bore the brunt of genocidal violence today enjoy higher rates of economic autonomy than women elsewhere. They are better educated and likelier to serve in outward-facing economic roles, including as heads of household and business managers. Importantly, these improvements in women's economic station are apparent across *both* female- and male-headed households, illustrating the broad cultural transformation that emerged out of the initial genocidal demographic shock.

Our results build on previous studies of historical legacies, which demonstrate how cultural values can be transmitted through family socialization.[13] By contrast, this paper suggests that the effects of a family experience, such as the death of a patriarch, are not confined to the household and can in fact have spillover effects on other community members. We show that communal networks can sustain shared legacies, especially in developing countries where houses are relatively small spaces and the majority of time is spent outside socializing with others.

Scholarship on female politicians in the developing world underlines how institutional design, through negotiated settlements and quotas, improves women's representation.[14] By

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[13] Balcells 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017.
[14] Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017; Bush 2011.

illustrating how political violence can create opportunities for women to exercise power in the absence of men, this paper shows that a relatively short but intensely destructive period can spur both women's economic empowerment and their ability to join and lead representative political institutions over time.[15] Furthermore, Cambodia is an important empirical setting for documenting the legacy of communist repression because it is increasingly difficult to study mass killing in other historically Maoist-Leninist countries.[16] Insights about the Khmer Rouge could shed light on the potential legacies of state violence during China's Communist Revolution or in the Soviet Gulags, instances where empirical studies are frustrated by lack of data.

[A] Conflict, Culture, and the Persistence of Gendered Political Change

Does violence impact *long-term* trends in women's political representation? Scholars have identified two principal drivers of the gender gap in running for and winning office: institutional changes and socioeconomic resources.[17] Conflict is thought to modify each of these factors in the short term. But by what mechanisms do these effects persist—if they do—over time?

Institutional accounts, emphasizing the new rules and regimes that are established in conflict-ending peace agreements, are the more common explanation for changes in female representation. Scholars have argued that democratization and constitutional reforms, including the adoption of proportional representation systems and gender quotas in parties and legislatures,

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[15] Bateson 2012.

[16] China and Russia, in particular, have exhumed such grim events from the historical record. The Chinese Communist Party, especially under Xi Jinping, has lionized its past. By forcing historians to write praise of the leadership, the party has played down the strife of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's Great Leap Forward. Vladimir Putin has taken steps to erase the history of Gulag atrocities, sending prosecutors to liquidate the archives of Memorial International, the organization dedicated to the remembrance of those who perished in the brutal forced labor camps.

[17] Piscopo 2019; Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2020. We bracket the role of psychological factors such as ambition in shaping individual-level incentives to seek office (Lawless and Fox 2010) in order to theorize aggregate-level variation, but return to this explanation in our empirics.

improve women's likelihood of securing elected office.[18] The scholarship on post-conflict Africa supports these theoretical predictions. Tripp documents how female political opportunities grew in post-war Uganda and Liberia, two cases where UN peacekeepers and international donors stayed on to help build electoral institutions.[19] Indeed, research links the end of civil war to the introduction of more inclusive institutions, which can serve to alter the gendered composition of the government.[20] The ways states are built in the years immediately after war shape political developmental pathways.

Nevertheless, scholars question whether institutional changes in the wake of war generate *long-term* legacies for women's representation.[21] Gender-based institutional reforms implemented following conflict may be withdrawn once international actors depart (e.g., after the US withdrew from Afghanistan). Post-war regimes begin to look outward for aid and international legitimacy, which incentivizes them to democratize, hold popular elections, and incorporate combatants into their new party system,[22] but newly established democratic institutions tend to backslide once aid disappears.[23] Additionally, while institutional changes imposed at the national level are well-equipped to explain cross-national variation in women's representation, they are less suited for analyzing why only certain regions within countries close the gender gap in political representation. And they struggle to explain why coalitions of voters and party gatekeepers choose women over men when both genders have opportunities to run for elected office.[24]

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[18] E.g., Paxton, Hughes, and Painter 2010; Bush 2011.
[19] Tripp 2015.
[20] Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019; Hughes and Tripp 2015.
[21] Hadzic and Tavits 2020.
[22] Matanock 2017.
[23] Meyerrose 2020.
[24] Arriola and Johnson 2014.

A second set of theories focus on resource-based explanations. Schlozman, Burns, and Verba attribute the gender gap in political participation to differences in women's and men's income and wealth.[25] By recalibrating economic milieus, war may create new avenues for women to seek political office. How so? First, war alters sex ratios in societies in which men are overrepresented among wartime casualties, in turn opening up economic opportunities for women.[26] As men die in conflict, women often take on larger economic roles, such as employment, management of household finances, and control over intra-household economic decision making, compared to pre-war periods.[27] Second, regardless of male deaths, wartime exigencies can materially augment women's status by prompting women to assume magnified economic roles. These may include undertaking new jobs (e.g., nurses to care for the wounded) or filling roles occupied by men in pre-conflict times, such as leadership positions in household businesses.[28] Women benefit from these roles—in the form of employment, education, wealth ownership and inheritance—once conflict ends. Economic and occupational opportunities that result from war may give women crucial leadership experience, increasing in turn the supply of women candidates running for office.[29] This new economic autonomy can provide women with resources that incentivize and facilitate running for office.

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[25] Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994. See also Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006.

[26] Hughes 2009.

[27] Tripp 2015. For example, Tripp (2015, 84) finds that "some of the most palpable changes for women in Liberia were evident at the local level during the war. Women who lost their husbands in the war were forced into running their households and finding food for their children." Even when women take on low-paying jobs, as is often the case in low-income conflict zones, they gain enhanced economic autonomy and decision-making within the household. During Angola's war, women "became the main breadwinners in the family" (Tripp 2015, 119; see also Berry 2017).

[28] See Jähner (2022)'s discussion of post-war Germany; during World War II, women operated trams and construction vehicles, and realized that cities did not need men in order to function.

[29] Hadzic and Tavits 2020. Of course, conflict can also dampen opportunities for women to run for political office. Cohen (2016) finds that the breakdown in social order can trigger sexual violence against women. Koos (2018, 198–201) theorizes that wartime rape stigmatizes victims and leads to long-term feelings of powerlessness and self-blame through a "decay" mechanism.

Critically, prior accounts of conflict and the gender gap predict greater economic autonomy to produce *short-term* increases in women's political representation. But does such representation persist over time? Hughes and Tripp finds little evidence that changes in sex ratios following war impact women's legislative representation.[30] Conflict also does not appear to skew sex ratios over the long term; Davis and Weinstein shows that post-war baby booms rebalance sex ratios within one-to-two decades.[31] Webster, Chen, and Beardsley similarly finds that "in the short and medium term, war shakes up established social and political orders and creates an opportunity for gains in women's empowerment," but indicates that it is unclear if these gains persist beyond ten-to-fifteen years.[32] Opportunities created by post-war gender imbalances have an expiration date. Similarly, occupational advancement and attendant economic gains spurred by conflict may not translate into long-term improvements. In Britain, for example, patriarchal forces inhibited the economic advances that women had achieved after World War II, pushing them back into the private domain and family life once wartime exigencies ended.[33] It is not clear from this scholarship whether and why the opportunities created amid wartime disruption persist for the long term.[34]

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[30] Hughes and Tripp 2015.

[31] Davis and Weinstein 2002.

[32] Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019, 256.

[33] Summerfield 1989.

[34] Additionally, while seminal scholarship has brought attention to the relationship between war and gender relations, it faces particular limitations in establishing causal relationships due to concerns related to aggregation bias in country-level quantitative studies and lack of representativeness and, in some instances, selection on the dependent variable in qualitative case studies. Newer studies make a case for employing micro-level analyses to better understand causal relations. For instance, Koos (2018) investigates the long-term effects of sexual violence on prosocial behavior in Sierra Leone; Gonzalez and Traunmüller (2020) examines the consequences of sexual assault on political engagement in Sri Lanka; Lindsey (2021) probes how community-level violence shapes gender norms in Democratic Republic of Congo; and Koos and Traunmüller (2021) studies the effects of sexual violence on community engagement and political attitudes.

[B] Theorizing Long-Term Effects: Disruption of Patriarchy and Community Norm Shift

Our argument focuses on the conditions that lead violence to upend traditional norms of patriarchy over the long run. The starting point of our theoretical analysis is the observation that women's relative resource-based disadvantages in politics[35] is a product of patriarchal norms that prohibit women from accumulating wealth and asserting intra-household bargaining rights.[36] These norms may take the form of formal codes that assign inheritance and wealth control rights to men or informal rules that specify child-rearing, caregiving, and household responsibilities that preclude income-generating employment to women.[37] Women who specialize occupationally in homecare, child-rearing, or lower-status jobs—especially those who do not have dependent support—are constrained in their ability to seek office and invest resources and time in political service.

This system represents an equilibrium. Men benefit economically, socially, and politically from patriarchy's architecture and have few incentives to dismantle it. Women believe (correctly) that efforts to advance their economic standing, such as by seeking education or starting businesses, will be met with resistance or prove futile, and hence eschew such costly investments. Both women and men anticipate sanctions, which may be orchestrated by members of both genders, if they transgress community norms. The political consequence of this status quo is that men retain positions of authority at home and in government while women remain excluded from the public domain.

In our account, wars can disrupt this equilibrium. Economic theories of cultural evolution predict that when communities experience a period of uncertainty and instability, they are likely to adopt new cultural values and spend less time maintaining tradition.[38] Cultural beliefs evolve to

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[35] Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994.
[36] Brulé and Gaikwad 2021.
[37] Robinson and Gottlieb 2021.
[38] Boyd and Richerson 1985; Feldman, Aoki, and Kumm 1994.

reflect the new relative payoffs for each gender, coming from shocks like innovations in agricultural technology or natural disasters.[39] Within this framework, we hypothesize that in societies facing abnormally high death rates among male soldiers and civilians, cultural norms about gender equality become relatively progressive. We predict these new norms to evolve primarily in regions experiencing mass male killings, where it becomes necessary for widows to assume larger economic roles, and less so in regions further away. Because of the benefits of economic independence for women and the benefits of reduced responsibilities for men, norms of gender equality spread to neighboring households, even those in which men survive. The relative benefits to each gender from transformations in the sexual division of labor within households explain why these norms persist even after the community recovers from the immediate aftermath of violence, allowing women to retain a greater foothold in politics for the long term.

There are several reasons why these reformed cultural beliefs about female empowerment are relatively beneficial to both men and women. First, these new norms expand women's options, making them aware of untried alternatives, such as single motherhood as a substitute to marriage.[40] Cultural beliefs also affect the utility that women derive from economic activities. Women may become more interested in investing in their daughters' education if they now engage in activities that require literacy and mathematical skills. Once widows break patriarchal norms prohibiting women from acquiring additional wealth and taking on more prominent economic and political roles, other women, who witness widows working outside the household and engaging in politics, may revise their own preferences correspondingly.

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[39] Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2013; Giuliano and Nunn 2020.
[40] See Jacobs 2020.

Second, socialization theories underscore how individuals adopt the behavior of role models outside the household through mechanisms of imitation and learning.[41] Women in male-headed households look to widowed neighbors, learning about the levels of autonomy they could plausibly achieve, and accordingly bargain for a commensurate level of independence. As more women assert themselves in domestic and communal life, other women are increasingly free to demand greater autonomy.[42] We therefore predict the following behavioral response: when female-headed households emerge in large numbers in communities experiencing high rates of male death, women in male-headed households observe and emulate the growing economic roles of widowed women. Empirically, we expect the household division of labor to shift across the community, as more women engage in economic activities in the public sphere.

Third, men themselves may enjoy being relieved of major economic responsibilities such as traveling for work and being the primary earner, allowing them to engage in more leisure activities, like socializing and even drinking. For instance, the shift from male breadwinner to dual-income households created more "available time" for the American husband.[43] We expect that the proliferation of female-headed households will lessen the economic, normative, and psychic *costs* to men of having more autonomous women in their households. Such costs should only decline further upon observing women assert themselves in other male-headed households. In turn, men may become more willing to accede to women's demands for independence, a greater share of household resources, and a larger political voice.

When male-headed households adopt the practices of female-headed households, it becomes more permissible for women to take on larger economic roles, including those related to

[41] Bisin and Verdier 2001.
[42] Granovetter 1978.
[43] Presser 1994.

employment, education, and business ownership.[44] Such a shift represents an *intra-communal* channel by which conflict—and the ensuing death of a large number of men—disrupts cultural norms regarding women's economic roles in society. When male-headed households imitate female-headed households by adopting more progressive practices regarding female education, occupation, and economic autonomy, women in subsequent cohorts also advance economically. Further, younger men and women both look to the generation of conflict survivors, observing and learning from their reformed attitudes and habits. This represents an *intergenerational* channel through which war empowers women.

The transformation in both men and women's incentives represents a key step by which the patriarchal equilibrium is punctured and relatively permissive gender norms take root. Individuals neither reap payoffs from enforcing gender-inegalitarian practices, nor face sanctions from elevating women to outward-facing roles. In turn, future generations of women are freer to pursue economic autonomy and political voice, which they do, even if it increases their workload, because it provides them freedom from the domicile. By contrast, in cases where most patriarchs survive or many soldiers return from war, subsequent cohorts of men may reassert their past privileges.[45]

Our central argument, then, is that conflict impacts the long-term representation of women in politics by shifting gendered roles both within households affected by wartime deaths and in surrounding communities. In localities that experience higher levels of violence, women take on larger economic and public roles. When large numbers of widows spend less time on housework and more time on external economic activities, their behaviors are emulated by women and

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[44] See Robinson and Gottlieb 2021's discussion of how matrilineal norms spread through Malawi.
[45] In such cases, patriarchy entrenches itself back into society. For example, in Jähner (2022, 117)'s account, a German World War II veteran complained that his wife "learned to say 'I' when I was away," illustrating how returning men reclaim their status once conflict ends.

accepted by surviving men in neighboring male-headed households. This disruption of conventional gender-based economic roles transforms cultural norms in the community: women have more resources to participate in politics and greater material stakes in political outcomes, spurring women to pursue positions of political authority.

[A] Case Setting and Multi-Methods Empirical Approach

Cambodia provides an ideal setting in which to examine the factors that affect local gender gaps because it exhibits tremendous variation in female representation. Historically, Cambodian women have faced challenging patriarchal norms en route to political office. Early ethnographies of Cambodian villages reveal that the men's role as heads of their households was undisputed; "the husband is technically the supreme authority who is owed deference, respect, and obedience by his family."[46] Social rules, manifested in the *Chbap Srey* ("Rules for Women"), an influential piece of Khmer literature traditionally passed on through elders, dictate that women are expected not to take controversial political positions or act publicly and independently from their spouses.[47] Despite these norms, women are nonetheless being elected to local positions of power in growing numbers. As of 2012, 18% of commune councilors, the lowest form of legislative office, were female, yet their geographic distribution is highly uneven. Why are women elected to local office in some villages and not others?

We contend that the Cambodian genocide produced enduring changes in patterns of female political representation. Pol Pot created one of modern history's most brutal and radical regimes. His attempts to "purify" Khmer society turned the nation upside down: his troops pulled families apart, closed schools and markets, required everyone (even children) to work, and killed teachers,

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[46] Ebihara 2018, 53.
[47] Ledgerwood 1996.

doctors, monks, bureaucrats, and many others with skills or education that threatened the classless regime.[48] As many as two million people were killed over the course of the calamitous agrarian revolution, which the U.S. Congress described as "one of the clearest examples of genocide in recent history."[49] Pol Pot's regime was intent on weeding out its enemies (namely, anti-communists, educated professionals, and ethnic minorities). Men were more frequently targeted because of their views than were women, especially during the anti-Communist purges of 1977 and 1978.[50] Since men were more likely than women to be educated and occupy positions in the government, schools, industry, military, and police, they were also more frequently the victims of political executions, particularly in the early months of the Khmer Rouge regime.[51] A survey of female survivors showed that 61.4% of respondents' spouses either had been killed or disappeared between 1975 and 1979.[52]

In 1979, after Pol Pot led a series of incursions into Vietnam, the Vietnamese government, a former ally of the Khmer Rouge, invaded and occupied Cambodia. With most of the country under Vietnamese control, genocide survivors returned to their villages from Khmer Rouge work brigades. They discovered that four years of mass killings had condemned a generation of men to their deaths. The proportion of rural households headed by women was thought to be as high as 30–35%, reaching 50% in some villages.[53] Even today, Cambodia's sex ratio is skewed for the

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[48] This raises the vital question of whether Khmer Rouge social policies shaped gender relations, independent from cultural transformations stemming from male deaths. It is plausible that women became more emancipated *during* the genocide—potentially through communist reeducation and female-only labor groups—in places where the Khmer Rouge was more violent and killed more men. Our empirical research design therefore adjudicates between the extent of social restructuring during the Khmer Rouge and women's economic empowerment in the wake of mass-killings.
[49] Foreign Relations Authorization Act 1987, 1405.
[50] Mysliwiec 1988, 58.
[51] Chandler 1991.
[52] De Langis et al. 2014, 50.
[53] Desbarats 1995, 126.

oldest cohort of citizens (age 55 and over), which has fewer than 65 males for every 100 females.[54] The current Prime Minister Hun Sen has held office since 1985 when he was appointed by the National Assembly and retained his position through the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1993; nevertheless, his party's victory in 2013 was relatively narrow and local elections remain competitive.

Relying on the women left behind, reconstruction resulted in a transformation of the once highly patriarchal society. For example, before the genocide, anthropologists argued that a widow had "considerable incentive to remarry," because she "[found] herself in need of male labor power to work the fields."[55] Interviews with Khmer Rouge survivors reveal no such incentive. Nor is it found among the 106 victims who responded to a 2014 survey that was part of the international tribunal investigation into Khmer Rouge crimes; in that survey, 72.2% of widows reported that they had not remarried because they preferred being single, even though it meant raising children on their own.[56] One respondent indicated that being a single parent provides more domestic and economic freedom: "For me, having a husband has no benefit.… I earn and decide everything by myself and this is way easier for me."[57] Another respondent actively rejects proposals: "Other men requested to marry me but I did not agree. I decided myself and I was determined not to be married again."[58]

This breaking from pre-genocide norms was not limited to matters of marriage. In an account of one village victimized by the Khmer Rouge, Zucker describes how most locals had "little knowledge of the traditional practices that were not only practiced in the neighboring

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[54] Central Intelligence Agency 2017.
[55] Ebihara 2018, 203; for additional information about pre-genocide patriarchy, see Appendix A.
[56] De Langis et al. 2014, 60.
[57] Ibid., 96.
[58] Ibid., 91. By comparison, Ebihara (2018, 203) found that traditional norms typically encouraged widows to remarry and that new spouses replaced the deceased mate "with relative ease."

commune, but also [those that] used to be practiced in [the village] itself before the Khmer Rouge revolution."[59] Interviews with commune councilors suggest that the genocide's demographic shift foreshadows widows' entrance into political life.[60] A female chief in Kandal explains why her introduction to politics followed the Khmer Rouge: "After Pol Pot, most of the men had died. Many widow women survived…. I volunteer to be the leader of a small group [dedicated to farming]." When asked why she got involved in politics, a female chief in Phnom Penh said, "I think it was just that I had to find jobs in order to sustain my living." These were not isolated instances. A 67-year old male commune chief in Takeo said that, "In general, as I have been working in this field, women who work with me are mostly widows."

The historical record lends plausibility to the claim that the genocide created openings for women to enter into politics. But what were the mechanisms by which female preferences were given voice in the public domain, such that proximity to violence prompted more women to seek and win election to local office? And did this lead to a long-term shift in female political engagement? The empirical analysis proceeds in two parts. We first use participant observation and original, in-depth ethnographic interviews with genocide survivors and local politicians to describe how exposure to genocide varies across villages and is connected to the number of women winning local office today. We carefully assess the sequencing of variables,[61] demonstrating that a post-genocide wave of female economic empowerment preceded female election to local office. Second, we examine whether these in-depth cases represent larger trends in Cambodian politics. We collect data from historical and contemporary sources to estimate exposure to mass violence and female representation in present-day commune councils. Responding to Straus's call for

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[59] Zucker 2013, 7.
[60] See Interview Archive from Cambodia Development Research Institute's 2021 project on Local Leadership in Cambodia.
[61] Mahoney 2010.

"explicit theory testing" in genocide studies,[62] these estimates are also used to test the hypothesized theoretical mechanisms, as we ascertain whether increased female representation emerged from the economic enfranchisement of women in the wake of the genocide and endured due to the concurrent remaking of gender norms.

[A] Qualitative Research Design and Findings

We conducted a qualitative investigation in two rural, borderland regions, which the Khmer Rouge named the Northeast and Northwest Zones.[63] In Summer 2018, a team of three American researchers and two Cambodian translators conducted 50 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, lasting from one to three hours in length. Professional Cambodian deminers from an international humanitarian organization informed us of the location of the main Khmer Rouge military camp in each zone. We interviewed residents of the villages within walking distance of the camp and then drove to the more distant villages in the zone to establish a counterfactual. The sample is a convenience sample, a selection strategy chosen because of the relatively small size of key populations of interest (e.g., genocide survivors, village chiefs, commune councilors). We also interviewed men and women outside these groups in order to glean broader perceptions of local politics, household responsibilities, and gender norms. Having female deminers introduce us to other women who normally do not speak for the household provided the opportunity to study actors at a permanent disadvantage, such as those lacking education or freedom to leave the domicile. Appendix B provides a detailed discussion of ethical considerations; Appendix C provides supplementary interview evidence.

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[62] Straus 2007, 449.

[63] Their agrarian economies are broadly representative of a country where 80% of residents are farmers. Most residents are subsistence farmers, although some households run small roadside shops and restaurants or provide transport or other labor.

Since our objective is to provide a thick description of a cultural schema and explain its emergence, we focus primarily on collecting high-quality, in-depth information rather than developing a representative sample with shorter, less-detailed interviews. We asked respondents about a variety of socio-economic topics (i.e., farming methods, experiences with local leaders, marriage status, domestic household responsibilities) and collected oral histories of the civil war. Of these, 25 were oral histories with former Khmer Rouge perpetrators or survivors, who could describe life before and after the genocide.

[B] Political Empowerment in Conflict Zones: Three Female Chiefs, Three Backgrounds

As described previously, anthropological studies show that social expectations of female behavior are often so freighted with misogyny that it may be surprising that women are elected politically at all.[64] However, in our qualitative research, we repeatedly encountered villages and communes where women have been chosen over men for positions of power.[65] For example, Len Solida has been the chief for Samlout Village in the Northwest Zone since the first election over 12 years ago.[66] She is highly critical of men in her village—they'd rather "clink their glasses [drinking] while the women have to work very hard"—and she also considers herself a loyal member of the

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[64] Ledgerwood 1996; Frieson 2001.

[65] Commune councils consist of five to 15 elected councilors, depending on the population of the commune. Commune councils were started in 2002, and elections are held every five years. The inaugural commune elections required each village to elect a chief, but the length of the chief's term and the timing of subsequent elections vary across villages. Both councilors and chiefs are considered local government authorities, tasked with maintaining order and promoting development. They are expected to travel throughout their constituency, resolving interpersonal conflicts, distributing information from the central government, and connecting with non-government organizations. Village chief and commune council signatures are often required for bank loans and land titles. Village chiefs typically grant permission to outsiders (including ourselves) to stay and speak with residents. Commune councils receive roughly 8,000 USD per year in government funding to spend on public goods provision, infrastructure improvements, and development activities.

[66] We use pseudonyms for names and locations to protect the identities of our respondents.

Cambodia People's Party, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen.[67] Chorn Chea, a commune councilor for the provincial capital in the Northeast Zone, represents the opposition party, and was recently promoted to district advisor.[68] Her father was a commander for the royal army; her family was even given a rubber plantation by Norodom Sihanouk, the former King of Cambodia and head of state. Sok Reaksa, the chief in Village Five, has yet a different background.[69] She was born in this Northeastern village, but comes from a poor family and has spent the past three decades traveling around the province to find work, doing odd jobs (farming, factory work, transport). She does not consider herself very political. The profiles of these three women in power suggest that female office-holders run the gamut in their qualifications, backgrounds, resources, party affiliations, and political interests. Given their differences, might there be a unifying reason why these women all ran for office and won elections?

We find that the local political landscape is shaped by the inheritance and legacy of the state-led mass killings during the Khmer Rouge. The demographic shift created by the disproportionate killing of men totally reordered household economies in affected localities. With reconstruction left up to the surviving adult women, traditional gender hierarchies succumbed to an economy in collapse. Proximity to Khmer Rouge violence best foreshadows a long-term change in gender norms. Indeed, these female politicians—Solida, Chea, and Reaksa—are similar in two distinct ways: they all live near former Khmer Rouge bases, where the genocide was particularly violent, and they all (including those who are married) consider themselves the heads of their household. Solida has held jobs that have out-ranked and out-paid her husband's work over the course of their marriage, which started in the late 1990s, giving her autonomy in household

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[67] Interview 47.
[68] Interview 8.
[69] Interview 7.

decision-making. Chea has lived as a single woman for the past 20 years, separated from the husband whom she was forced to marry during the Khmer Rouge. Reaksa was a single mother after the genocide, but has since remarried. Where genocide depleted the stock of adult men, marital separation and female independence have become socially acceptable and common, providing women a conduit to political power.[70]

[B] Traditional Norms Persist in Less Violent Areas

To analyze how violence spurred women to political office, we first study communes that were relatively untouched by the genocide. In areas where Khmer Rouge violence was less intense, two trends are apparent: women have less economic autonomy and patriarchal norms persist. We find that these trends diminish women's ability to take on positions of political leadership because local politics are believed to be beyond the scope of women's interest and responsibilities. For example, Deth Arun was born in Lom's Village in the Northeast Zone and has lived there his entire life.[71] He has been the chief for the past ten years. His village remained relatively intact during the Khmer Rouge because it was hidden in the mountains and difficult to access from the Khmer Rouge's regional base. Villagers were able to live in their own houses for the first half of the genocide. While Khmer Rouge soldiers eventually relocated the residents to a remote worksite in 1977, that camp experienced remarkably less violence than others did. Arun observes that "all of them [the former residents] came back" at the end of the genocide, including a significant adult male population. By 2008, 94% of the households were run by men according to the village census, and

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[70] The majority of Cambodian households comprise extended family (e.g., married children, grandparents, nieces and nephews), and domestic chores and childcare are often delegated to other adults while the parents find work (Ebihara 2018, 50–51, 185–200). This suggests social expectations about the gendered division of labor more than primary caretaker responsibilities (which can be shared with other adults) bind women to the household.

[71] Interview 24.

Lom's Village appears to have retained many of the traditional gender structures within the household. "Women take care of the children and look after the house," Arun explains, while "men go out to claim farmland, closely surveying it to make sure it is safe." He says that men have to leave for work in order to "feed their wives and children." He is adamant that "all men have to do this," a statement manifesting a milieu in which economic roles remain highly gendered.

In these male-headed household towns, women remain in charge of raising children, cooking, and chores. Leng Sola, a married woman who lives in nearby Banteay Village, describes her work as "staying at home and taking care of her child."[72] She mostly "steams rice and looks after her baby," and if it is growing season, she will go out and plant cassava root. Her husband leaves the village often to find work in construction, building houses and pouring concrete. He is the one who represents the household at village meetings; she has never attended one. Her husband also knows the village chief and speaks to him about crops and job opportunities. "I've never met the village chief because I never leave the house," she notes.

For women living in places where traditional gender roles persist, interaction with the outside world is mostly social. Mul Veata lives in Village One in the Northeast Zone, a settlement far from Khmer Rouge mass graves. She says that she doesn't know the names of any commune councilors. "I've been living here for a long time, but I just stay at home. I don't go to the village center or the road."[73] This ability to leave the farm, she explains, defines who runs the family. "Here, men are heads of the family because they are the ones that are responsible for going outside to earn money," she states. She and her husband follow the traditional division of labor; "My husband doesn't really work on the farm. Only I go into the fields—usually every day."

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[72] Interview 9.
[73] Interview 26.

Reach Sambot, a male farmer from a Northwest village with mostly male-headed households, does not see this household division of labor as particularly unfair or limiting to women. He says, "Yes, they [husbands and wives] are equals. Wives sell goods while their husbands go into the jungle. Husbands will also drink, but they are responsible, and the man is the head of the family."[74] He believes that the household depends equally on the husband and wife, so this represents a form of gender equality. But his final declaration, "the man is the head of the family," underscores the irony of his claim: even though men and women are equally responsible for contributing to the domestic economy, the man is still in charge of decision-making and represents the family outside of the house.

When household power remains with men, the hierarchy at home reproduces itself in the village government, where women serve as deputies to men, if at all. In Chrey Village in the former Northwest Zone, Grandfather Tichuan has served as village chief for almost 30 continuous years, running a village more than fifty miles away from the former Khmer Rouge base. "Mostly men" head the households, according to one farming couple.[75] "Yes, the political party empowers women to join parties," the husband says. His wife chimes in: "The party gives chances to women." Yet while there are one or two women working for the commune council, they serve in "lower positions," not as chiefs but as administrative clerks. Although there are no formal restrictions against women running, the husband reports, "there are supposed to be more men than women; that's how the political parties want it." He thinks the parties end up "picking more men than women" to run for political office. Rather than attributing the gender inequity to a persistence of patriarchal norms, the farmer believes that political parties—which hold large amounts of power

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[74] Interview 40.
[75] Interview 43.

to provide public goods, take away land, and redistribute resources—are primarily responsible for appointing men versus women in positions of power.

[B] Women's Economic Empowerment Leads to Political Empowerment in Conflict Zones
In areas where many men died in the genocide, by contrast, we observe two patterns: First, women in affected households took on positions of economic autonomy. Second, patriarchal norms were disrupted, making it permissible for women to become more politically engaged, attend town hall meetings, run for office, and serve as village chief or commune councilor.

Respondents in these areas describe the transformative experience of genocide. We turn to Reaksa's oral history to trace how conflict spurred her into office. Reaksa observed a complete social restructuring when she returned to her village. She remembers that when she was a child the village was made up of two large families housed along a stretch of dirt road. Her wedding took place in 1972, a day before her village was overtaken by conflict between the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian state military. Upon their victory, the Khmer Rouge moved all citizens in her commune to the nearby base they called Camp Mo-Buy. Women were separated from men and placed into their own mobile unit. They would leave their tents each day to harvest rice, dig canals, or build dams, and then return at night. Reaksa's mobile unit remained in operation for all four years of the genocide; the women who comprised it are unaware of what happened to the men.

Reaksa's experience illustrates that where the genocide killed large proportions of the population, the Khmer Rouge collaterally created space for women to assume leadership roles in their households. In the wake of the genocide, household leadership impelled women to find jobs, run non-agricultural businesses, move their family, and make independent decisions on whether and when to remarry. By 1980, shortly after the end of the genocide, Reaksa returned to Village

Five, where "very few men [from the original two families] made it back." She found no work there, so she moved to the provincial capital, where she found odds-and-ends jobs. At the same time, she was a single mother, taking care of two children. After four to seven years (she says she lost track) working in the capital, she again returned to Village Five when she found work as a hired laborer on a farm. She remarried and has seven children across both marriages, yet continues to consider herself the head of her household. Meanwhile, she realized that she loved to learn new trades and skills—including reading, writing, filling out forms, and managing land—and so she decided to run for chiefdom.

We find that as widows assumed economic autonomy in conflict zones, women in more conventional family structures also began taking on larger economic roles and more control over household decision-making.[76] A constituent in Solida's village estimates that women serve as heads of household for about half of the families in her village. She emphasizes that these are not only households of widows but also *married* households. When describing how a family decides who is head of household, she provides an earning metric: "In some families, the woman earns the most, so she is the head. In other families, the man earns more, so then he's the head of the household."[77]

In another nearby village, a female farmer reports that women frequently serve as heads of household because "the wife works harder than the husband," who she says typically spends his time drinking and sleeping. "The women in this district work so hard they're exhausted," while men contribute relatively little.[78] Reaksa, the chief for Village Five, says that substantively, even

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[76] In line with Bernhard, Shames, and Teele (2020), female villagers note a tradeoff between economic activity and political participation. Solida reported that being village chief "is hard work. [...] No free time. I hardly can find time to take care of my own business" (Interview 47). Reaksa remarked, "I don't have any [other job], I work for the government and it's very busy. I don't have any farmland" (Interview 7).
[77] Interview 38.
[78] Interview 39.

though "there isn't much of a difference" between male and female heads of household, she defines the head of the family as the one in the best position to make decisions, who is not necessarily the man. For her, a woman runs the family "if the husband doesn't know much. Then the woman will be the leader, and she'll tell him what to do." In these villages, women assumed greater independence and authority in the wake of the genocide—something that was tolerated by the men who remained present. In fact, we find that the surviving men seem to benefit when their wives emulate the economic practices adopted by widows in female-headed households; men, relieved of the breadwinner role, enjoy more leisure activities like walking around the neighborhood and socializing, *da laing* in Khmer.[79] This diffusion of women's economic authority resonates with the intra-communal mechanism by which conflict is theorized to affect gender roles not only in households facing male deaths but in the community at large.

Another woman in Reaksa's constituency describes how the legacy of women's empowerment in Village Five has been transmitted through intergenerational channels.[80] When she was young in the early 1970s (before the genocide), her parents would send her to school and she would skip class to play, because she did not see the point in educating herself. Even if she did learn to read, she explained, she would still end up working on a farm all day as a housewife. But now it's different, she says; her daughters can get jobs outside of the house even if they are married—something that is less true in communities less affected by the genocide. Reaksa herself describes education as a key motivation in seeking local office.[81] These accounts indicate that even in households led by men and households with husbands present, the economic exigencies of

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[79] Interviews 39, 47.
[80] Interview 16.
[81] Interview 7.

the genocide affected the utility that women derive from educational activities by changing their preferences, altering systematically women's place in the family and broader community.

This process of women acquiring greater economic independence chipped away at the patriarchal norms limiting women's entry into local politics. While women were rarely visible before the war, we find that they now shape the political landscape in their male-depleted villages, akin to the earlier examples of Chea, Solida, and Reaksa. In Solida's village (only three miles away from the old Khmer Rouge camp), we ask her constituents if women commonly take positions of power. A wife speaks for her household, telling us that the chief of the neighboring village, Odong, is also a woman.[82] So is the commune chief, she says. Although she knows that it is unusual to have so many women in leadership roles, she points to a shift in social norms: "Now, we think that a woman could do the same work that any man does."

To explicate how female economic autonomy translates into political leadership with widespread community support, we draw on Solida's experience. Solida was elected chief of her genocide-ravaged village in 2006; the previous chief was a man, appointed by the commune government. He had "little support" in the village, so the commune council asked the residents who they would like as chief and asked those people to be candidates. She recalls the ballot had ten candidates: six women and four men (including the incumbent village chief). All candidates were affiliated with the ruling party. When they tallied the votes, Solida had the most supporters, followed by another woman, who became Solida's deputy. Like the old village chief, Solida is knowledgeable about security issues and is well-connected to non-governmental organizations; she knows landmine locations and the best ways to keep villagers safe. But she finds that women are more reliable and "better at focusing," so it is unsurprising to her that more women in her

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[82] Interview 38.

commune run for and win political office.[83] For every hundred men in her village, she estimates that "only six participate" in community meetings.

Solida's account underscores how women have risen to political office in the presence of male competition and with the backing of broad coalitions of voters. Why do women run for and then win local elections in Cambodia? Interviewees emphasize that women act differently than men once in office.[84] Respondents in villages with male chiefs reported that meetings were devoted to three main topics: dispensing agricultural advice on which crops to grow, reminding villagers to pen their livestock, and informing constituents about non-governmental organizations' offers of loans, equipment, or education.[85] One chief was obsessed with landmine clearance to the point that he spent most of his time either removing mines by hand or traveling to various government offices to submit proposals for professional removal.[86]

Female politicians help their constituents in other ways, Solida says. Her political party (the Cambodia People's Party) benefits from having more female representatives: "When women are invited to join the party, the women are eager to understand more about social issues." Chea, who belongs to the opposition party, observes a similar trend. Her female constituents contact her about personal family and marriage issues, asking for her advice on what to do if a husband drinks too much or on how to get a divorce.[87] In other words, women in traditional domestic structures are learning from their politically and economically empowered female representatives. These women are also becoming more vocal in her village, she says. "Now women speak more. In the

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[83] Our female respondents experience a complicated political reality in which their empowerment is occasionally greeted with mockery; for instance, certain older men in Solida's village are prone to tease her at meetings (see Appendix A), evidencing male discomfort with female empowerment.

[84] Shair-Rosenfield and Wood (2017) similarly finds that female politicians in post-conflict settings tend to privilege social spending over military spending.

[85] Interviews 29, 33.

[86] Interview 50.

[87] Interview 8.

past, they couldn't even if they wanted to. Now, women understand more, and they ask more questions. Sometimes, more than men." Why? The reasoning, to her, is simple. "Most women like having a woman on the commune council because we can talk more honestly. We can talk to each other, woman to woman."

These interviews lend prima facie credibility to the contention that the post-genocide economic empowerment of women and the associated cultural shift enabled women to remain active participants in local politics decades after the genocide's end. Khmer Rouge violence was quite localized and therefore varied widely across villages. Residents of villages that experienced less violence continue to hold patriarchal beliefs and resist female political participation. Where Khmer Rouge killings were more intense, we observe an intra-communal and intergenerational erosion of these traditional norms, triggered by women's assumption of new economic roles in the genocide's aftermath.

[A] Quantitative Research Design and Findings

How generalizable are the experiences documented above? We now search for legacies of the genocide across the entirety of Cambodia to ascertain whether widespread variation in female representation is due to violence and the ensuing community-wide economic empowerment of women. We assemble our data using sources collected by the Cambodian and international co-prosecutors as evidence in the United Nations-backed tribunal prosecuting the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. The anonymized evidence, archived in the Cambodian Genocide Program Database at Yale University, includes a 1995–2003 national survey of genocidal violence. The main feature of the survey asked village leaders to identify the location of mass graves, which served as a proxy for genocide intensity in the tribunal. We mapped the 309 Khmer Rouge mass graves onto village

hamlets over the full territory of the country. Anthropological research indicates that victims were typically executed at gravesites in close walking proximity to their residence.[88] Consequently we drew a circle with a five-kilometer radius around each village, and used this procedure to create a variable that counts the number of gravesites within close walking distance of each village.[89] In tests conducted at the commune level—one administrative level above the village—we take an unweighted mean of this measure across all constituent villages. The spatial distribution of gravesites is illustrated in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 around here]

We use the gravesite measure to predict two sets of outcomes. First, we evaluate whether genocide exposure is in fact associated with more women seeking and holding political office today. We do so by analyzing the gender composition of commune councils and party lists for commune councils, the prominent tiers of local governance. Second, in order to test the mechanisms in our theoretical argument, we probe whether the connection between genocide exposure and female political representation is sustained by the community-wide economic shifts theorized earlier to occur in the wake of conflict. We do so using unique household-level data on gender roles and economic life.

Our ability to identify the effect of local-level genocide violence hinges on the assumption that the skewed gender ratios emerging from the genocide are plausibly exogenous to prior gender

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[88] Bennett 2015, 54–57, 66–73, 147, 185–189. In line with this anthropological evidence, Appendix D shows that gravesites are associated with depressed populations of elder men in nearby communities, indicating that graves likely hold victims who once resided nearby.

[89] Appendix E presents tests using alternative bandwidths; corroborating our argument, we obtain qualitatively stronger results when focusing on gravesites more proximate to given communities.

norms of villages. Ethnographic accounts suggest that genocide violence felt relatively haphazard, according to survivors, and depended more on exhaustion and food availability than pre-war beliefs.[90] As noted earlier, when Pol Pot sought to eradicate his enemies, he instructed his troops to target based on occupation, affiliation with the prior regime, and race, but did not distinguish between genders. Yet demographic analysis finds that adult men were 2.5 to 3 times more likely to die than adult women,[91] due to the fact that men were more likely to hold political positions in the previous regime, putting them at higher risk of execution.[92] Furthermore, interviews indicate that men tended to be assigned more strenuous tasks (i.e., moving heavy equipment, removing landmines), increasing their likelihood of starvation and death.[93] Thus, the skewed gender ratios in the immediate wake of genocide were an unintentional byproduct of the Khmer Rouge's repression strategy.

While genocidal violence appears unrelated to pre-genocide gender norms, other factors such as proximity to more industrialized and urbanized areas possibly influenced the intensity of Khmer Rouge violence. We are accordingly careful to control for distance to Phnom Penh, distance to the nearest provincial capital, and distance to the nearest colonial-era highway. If post-genocide reconstruction and industrialization reshaped gender norms, independent of the genocide, such changes were also likely more extensive closer to major roads and urban centers, such as Phnom Penh and the surrounding lowlands. For this reason, we also control for villages and communes' topographical elevation and latitude, since the more remote areas in the mountainous north were less accessible. Appendix F provides details on the sources and calculations of these pre-treatment measures.

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[90] Ebihara 2018.
[91] de Walque 2005.
[92] Mysliwiec 1988.
[93] Interviews 47, 49.

In all estimates, we add fixed effects for the seven Khmer Rouge administrative zones, which allow us to examine micro-level variation within zones and ensure that we are not simply capturing regional differences. By including zone fixed effects, we adjust for the possible confounding influence of unobserved differences in zone commanders' implementation of Pol Pot's policies or regional variation in regime ideology (see also Appendix A).

To further disentangle the effect of mass killings from the Khmer Rouge's (uneven) efforts to remake society—for example, through gender-segregated workplaces and re-education programs—we leverage sub-national variation in communist ideology. We estimate a border discontinuity model, drawing from Grasse 2022, in which we compare communes that were virtually indistinguishable with respect to pre-genocide cultural, political, and economic characteristics at the border between the West and Southwest administrative zones. While Pol Pot issued orders from the capital, Phnom Penh, the implementation of his mandates varied significantly across zones.[94] Consequently, much of the Khmer Rouge's social project was determined at this level. The Southwest Zone was commanded by Ta Mok, a longtime participant in the communist movement who diligently executed Pol Pot's directives, including mass forced marriages and the division of men and women in the workplace.[95] The West Zone, on the other hand, was led by Chou Chet, who was widely regarded as less zealous an ideologue than Ta Mok and who was ultimately executed amid fears of disloyalty to the party.[96] As a result, implementation of Khmer Rouge directives in the West Zone, and consequently the strength of

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[94] The central government found it difficult to coordinate policy between zones because the secretaries were effectively governing their former combat theaters and controlled the soldiers in charge of enforcing state policy. Not only did zone commanders hold a great deal of *de facto* authority, but their ideologies also ranged from moderate communists to repressive extremists (Grasse 2022, 11).

[95] Vickery 1984, 68; Ea 2005, 126.

[96] ECCC 2012.

communist ideology and social programming, was substantially different than in the Southwest Zone.[97]

If communist reform has an independent effect on gender roles, we expect to observe variation in our outcomes at the regional level and a discrete difference at the West-Southwest border. Conversely, the association between grave sites and modern-day political outcomes should be consistent across these two zones if violence independently shaped women's political representation. An advantage of this micro-level geographic analysis is that it allows us to collect historical, geospatial data from declassified topographic maps developed by the US Army Map Service (1962–1967) for the purpose of military land navigation. We were able to find the maps along the West-Southwest border, which is roughly 200 kilometers long, to identify the locations of pre-Khmer Rouge secondary schools and local government offices within 10 kilometers of the zone boundary (see Appendix F). This data allows us to address an additional threat to inference: whether richer, more educated, and bureaucratically more centralized locations both held more liberal views of women that predated the Khmer Rouge and were more desirable targets of the Khmer Rouge, who sought to destroy traces of Western modernization.

All models are estimated via ordinary least squares unless otherwise stated; robust standard errors are clustered at the village level in household-level tests. Descriptive statistics are available in Appendix H; details on the regression model specifications are available in Appendix I.

[B] Genocide Exposure and Women in Political Office

We expect women to achieve greater political representation in communities that experienced more intense violence under the Khmer Rouge. To test this contention, we use new data on the

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[97] Additional detail on differences between the West and Southwest zones and this border discontinuity model is available in Appendix G.

genders of candidates for, and elected members of, individual commune councils, which represent each of the 1,621 communes in the country as of 2008. To gather data on party lists of candidates for commune council, we analyzed press releases published by Cambodia's National Election Committee, covering candidates standing for election in 2012. At least one candidate was identified for 1,283 councils. We collected data on the gender composition of 1,578 commune councils through the Commune Council Database of the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development, covering all councilors with terms beginning in 2007 and 2012. In total, our data include gender information on 88,613 party candidates and 22,103 sitting councilors. Our measures of female political representation are the shares of party list candidates and sitting councilors who are women.

Table 1 shows that genocide exposure predicts significantly higher rates of female representation on both electoral party lists and commune councils. In models with the full covariate sets, an increase of one gravesite in close proximity to an average village corresponds to approximately a one percentage point increase in the share of candidates who are women and a 1.2-percentage point increase in the share of elected councilors who are women. We find similar results when we weight each gravesite by size, i.e., number of reported burials and deaths (see Appendix J).

These results are substantively significant. The average party list is roughly 26% female; one additional gravesite would be then expected to produce a 4% increase in female representation on these lists. The average commune council, on the other hand, is about 16% female; one additional gravesite would correspond to a 7% increase in female representation on these councils. Placed in context, these improvements in women's representation are commensurate with those

resulting from the initial implementation of gender quotas in such middle-income countries as Brazil, Indonesia, and Kenya.[98]

[Table 1 around here]

It is notable that women in genocide-exposed communes seek *and win* political office, both to similar extents, more than women exposed to less genocide violence. Whereas seeking office is often conceived of as a personal strategic choice,[99] winning office typically requires the consent of a broader set of actors, including the electorate and local political gatekeepers.[100] Hence, the tendency of women to enter into office at higher rates in genocide-exposed communes suggests a broader shift in gender attitudes in those communities—the societal arbiters of political power as well as broad coalitions of voters became more accepting of women in positions of political authority.

As discussed previously, it is possible that Khmer Rouge ideology—not violence—produced these observed improvements in female political engagement. To evaluate this claim, we leverage a geographic border discontinuity, comparing communes within 10km from the border between the West and Southwest Khmer Rouge zones, which represented opposite ends of Khmer Rouge radicalism and ideological orientation. Our expectation is that on both sides of the border, proximate grave sites should be associated with higher levels of female representation on party lists and commune councils. Such a result would indicate that violence has effects independent of those of ideology.

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[98] Hughes et al. 2017.
[99] E.g., Lawless and Fox 2010.
[100] The main results are also robust to including party fixed effects (Appendix K), bolstering our confidence that the effects of genocide are consistent across political ideology and party strength.

[Table 2 around here]

Table 2 reveals that grave sites are associated with increased female political representation on both sides of the West-Southwest border. There are no statistically significant differences between the coefficients for grave sites in each zone. These results are robust to the inclusion of our standard pre-treatment controls. Upon introducing the declassified geospatial data of the 75 secondary schools and 44 government offices within 10km of the inter-zone border, we find that there is no relationship between these markers of pre-genocide liberal values and contemporary female participation. These tests help dispel two threats to inference in our primary tests. First, our finding that the relationship between grave sites and women's political engagement was consistent in the West and Southwest zones allays concerns that Khmer Rouge ideology, not violence, produced the observed results. Second, these results indicate that the relationship between mass graves and political outcomes is not an artifact of the Khmer Rouge targeting more liberal and gender-egalitarian communities.

[B] Testing Mechanisms: Women's Economic Empowerment Within and Across Households

We theorize that political effects persisted even as sex ratios recovered because of a cultural shift in victimized communities in favor of women's economic empowerment. Empirically, we first assess whether genocide exposure predicts contemporary levels of socioeconomic autonomy for women. We do so using two primary measures: the proportion of heads of household (the individuals charged with making economic decisions on the household's behalf) who are women and local literacy rates among women at least fifteen years of age. We draw on the 2008 Cambodian Population Census for data on these variables.

As Table 3 shows, genocide exposure is correlated with significantly higher densities of female-headed households and higher rates of female literacy. The addition of one gravesite proximate to a typical village—the equivalent of about a one standard deviation increase in this measure—is associated with roughly a one percentage point increase in the density of female-headed households in a given commune and, in the model with the full covariate set, a two percentage point increase in the rate of female literacy. These results are qualitatively meaningful. In the typical commune in Cambodia, about 25% of households are headed by women and 66% of women are literate; the addition of one gravesite would be expected to increase these rates by about 4% and 3%, respectively. We find similar results when, like above, we estimate a geographic discontinuity model to separate the effects of violence from ideology and account for potential endogeneity to pre-genocide cultural attitudes (see Appendix L).

[Table 3 around here]

These results suggest that differential exposure to the genocide across Cambodia produced divergent levels of female economic empowerment, as some women came to assume roles and responsibilities once reserved for men. Initially, this may have been a necessity, such as when women were widowed during the course of the genocide. However, our theoretical contention is that over time the genocide prompted a broader shift in cultural attitudes that permitted women to take on more authoritative roles within both their families and local communities, regardless of whether they directly experienced the loss of a male relative.

To test this mechanism of cultural diffusion, we leverage individual-level data on socioeconomic independence and the distribution of familial responsibilities from the 2009

Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES), which we aggregate up to the household level. We first evaluate how genocide exposure reshaped gender roles within female-headed households, where women occupy positions of authority. We then assess whether the changes in gender roles within female-headed households are reflected in male-headed households elsewhere in exposed communities, which would indicate a diffusion of more gender-egalitarian attitudes across households regardless of their demographic composition.

We measure within-household economic empowerment using two metrics: the distribution of responsibilities for managing businesses and the number of completed years of schooling. Both metrics capture improvements in women's economic independence and their assumption of outward-facing economic roles, which we argue should have emerged out of the genocide and preceded the entry of women into local political life. We regress these outcomes on the gravesite measure using household-level sampling weights included within the CSES database. Results are reported in Table 4.

In households led by women, we find that genocide exposure produced significantly higher levels of female economic autonomy. The addition of one gravesite in close proximity to a given village is associated with a two-to-four percentage point increase in the likelihood of women within female-headed households managing a business, as well as a substantial increase in female educational attainment. The effect of the genocide is not exclusively captured by family demographics—across female-headed households, those most exposed to the genocide exhibit the highest levels of female socioeconomic autonomy.

[Table 4 around here]

Even more strikingly, we find relationships of similar magnitudes in *male*-headed households in genocide-exposed villages: a one-to-two percentage point increase in the likelihood of female business management and significant increases in schooling for women. That genocide exposure prompted a shift in gender roles within both female- and male-headed households is notable and corroborates our claim of an inter-household cultural shift.

Finally, we examine whether the genocide reshaped patterns of household spending. We focus specifically on education spending, which is often regarded as a priority for women. An analysis of education spending is also useful because it allows us to assess how households allocate resources specifically to girls, and accordingly enables us to estimate the ability of women to bargain for a greater share of finite household resources. For this test, we again draw on household-level data from the 2009 CSES and distinguish between female- and male-headed households. We anticipate that male-headed households more exposed to the genocide should spend more on education, including for girls.[101]

Table 5 offers further support for the theorized causal mechanism. Across both female- and male-headed households, proximity to graves is associated with significantly higher shares of spending going to education. On average, the addition of one gravesite within five kilometers of a given village is associated with a 1.7-percentage point increase in the share of spending going to education, an increase apparent across both female- and male-headed households.

[Table 5 around here]

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[101] Conversely, there are plausible reasons why spending on girls' education in female-led families is not qualitatively impacted by violence. Even in patriarchal settings, households run by women generally spend more on girls' education compared to households run by men (Alderman and King 1998). This implies that the disruption of patriarchy is most acutely felt in male-headed households, so far as girls' education is concerned.

Notably, there is a significant increase in the percentage of total spending allocated specifically to the education of women and girls—one driven by *male*-headed households. We find an equivalent result when analyzing education spending on each woman or girl in the household: an increase concentrated in male-headed households. One additional gravesite proximate to a given household is associated with approximately 38,000 additional Cambodian riel spent on the education of each woman and girl. In male-headed households specifically, the increase is roughly 44,000 riel. An interpretation of these findings is that where violence disrupts patriarchy, its most perceptible effects on girls' advancement are to be found in the most traditional corners of society (i.e., male-headed households).

We further conduct a series of supplemental analyses to assess whether these economic and cultural transformations triggered and sustained the higher rates of female political representation described above (Appendices M, N, and O). First, we estimate a set of interaction models that indicate that the observed relationship between genocide exposure and female political representation is strongest in the communities where women are most economically autonomous. Second, we perform causal mediation analyses to evaluate how much the effects of the genocide on female political representation are channeled through these economic and cultural mechanisms. We find that our primary indicators of female socioeconomic empowerment, the prevalence of female-headed households and rates of female literacy, explain substantial portions of the effect of genocide exposure on women's political participation today. Importantly, we find that skewed sex ratios—both overall and in older cohorts—are *not* a significant mediator of the genocide's effects, underscoring the importance of the theorized economic and cultural mechanisms independent of demographic effects. Third, we estimate instrumental variable regressions that treat the siting of gravesites within Khmer Rouge zones as a quasi-exogenous determinant of female

socioeconomic empowerment, and in turn female political representation; results are in line with expectations. Finally, we re-estimate our models including a fixed effects term for provincial boundaries imposed by the French colonial government as an alternative means of accounting for unobserved spatial heterogeneity; results are consistent.

The ethnographic interviews discussed above point to the genocide transforming gender attitudes across affected communities, both in widows' households and nearby homes. The quantitative evidence presented here corroborates this finding systematically. Regardless of whether men had primary decision-making authority in their families, women were able to assume greater economic power and independence as gender norms were transformed in the most genocide-exposed villages. Women took on more decision-making responsibilities within the household, adopted more outward-facing economic roles, received better educations, and enjoyed greater investments of household resources. That these trends are apparent across both female- and male-headed households indicate that the effect of the genocide went beyond the initial shock to sex ratios; the traumatic upheavals wrought by the genocide triggered a reckoning with the once-deeply entrenched patriarchal culture, prompting women to obtain positions of political power even as male populations recovered.

[A] Conclusion

Does war shape how women interact with the state and engage in politics *in the long run*? By focusing on transformations in gender norms, this research establishes a new, persistent consequence of political violence. Interviews with Khmer Rouge survivors reveal that the local disruption of a deeply patriarchal culture was an unintended consequence of the genocide. Upon assuming more economic power, women began to see themselves as more active participants in

local communities and increasingly asserted themselves in political affairs—moves that were emulated by other community members. Rather than experiencing a revival of pre-genocide gender relations after the killings ended and the country's male population rebounded, the communities most exposed to the genocide developed more equitable gender norms. Decades after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, women remain more economically autonomous in genocide-exposed regions, and such communities feature significantly more women seeking and securing political office. Extensive quantitative evidence corroborates these ethnographic narratives.

A central premise of this article—that post-conflict communities develop new expectations of female behavior *once* the men and women in traditional gender structures accept and take personal advantage of changing norms—is striking within the context of the political economy literature on war and gender. Perhaps the most prevalent set of explanations points to the policies of post-war institutions (e.g., legislative quotas or democratic elections) that augment female representation.[102] A burgeoning literature points to wartime female independence and its lingering effects on women's preferences.[103] What is missing from these accounts is an appreciation of the role of the remaining community members: how the incentives and behaviors of men and women in traditional domestic structures are also disrupted by violence. We find that independent of reformed institutions, patterns of emulation that erode patriarchal norms can sustain women's long-term place in local politics. A theoretical contribution of this research, then, is to document the *composite* effects of political violence on social relations through intra-communal and intergenerational channels over time. The presence of adult men (and the disproportionate amount of space they occupy in public spheres) is not the only limiting factor in equal representation: even

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[102] Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017; Tripp 2015; Paxton, Hughes, and Painter 2010.
[103] Acemoglu, Autor, and Lyle 2004; Hadzic and Tavits 2020.

if many men are removed from society, the beliefs held by the remaining women and men also need to change.

This pathway by which the behavior of widows, untied from custom and deference, becomes firmly lodged in the human psyche resonates with theories of community socialization that highlight how local norms beyond the family can shape individual attitudes.[104] These studies have made impressive inroads in exploring *whether* community structure matters in the long run. We identify the causal mechanisms that account for *why* these effects occur. The number of women pressed into outward-facing roles reflected the country's postwar demographic reality. Large swathes of men disappeared from society—from political patriarchs and Buddhist monks to the soldiers from the Cambodian Army and Khmer Rouge. Importantly, too, the end of the genocide was followed by twenty years of civil war. These long periods of political uncertainty and economic insecurity forced female survivors to develop their own means of persistence—or else face impoverishment while clinging to traditional expectations. The sheer intensity of violence inflicted against men ranging from young soldiers to family patriarchs, paired with severe economic scarcities, may help us better understand why certain wars have led to new gender norms while others have not. When casualties are contained to particular cohorts of men (for example, young or unmarried conscripts) or when most servicemen return from war, incumbent patriarchs may inhibit female economic political advancement in the wake of violence.

An unexpected consequence of the Cambodian genocide was that it brought women together to resist the reassertion of male authority. This is not to romanticize the lives of female genocide survivors. As our ethnographic evidence indicates, widows faced multiplex challenges while navigating new breadwinner responsibilities. In the context of a highly impoverished

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[104] Charnysh and Peisakhin 2021.

society, economic autonomy translated into leadership opportunities for some but also low-paying jobs for others. Female heads of household often face a double burden in building careers while managing chores at home. Their paths to power push against the tendency to categorize their experience as pure hardship or simple victory. Taken together, our qualitative and quantitative examinations of Cambodia illustrate how many women have adapted to extraordinary circumstances, living as best they can in a community still making sense of political trauma.

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	% women, party list		% women, council	
Grave sites (≤5km)	0.016***	0.011**	0.014***	0.012***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Mean elevation		0.000*		0.000**
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Latitude		0.011		−0.009
		(0.008)		(0.007)
Dist. to Phnom Penh		−0.000+		0.000
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Dist. to provincial capital		−0.000***		−0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Median dist. to road		0.000		0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Constant	0.243***	0.149	0.139***	0.278***
	(0.007)	(0.097)	(0.008)	(0.082)
Observations	1281	1281	1566	1566

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; +$p < .1$

Table 1: OLS regressions of commune-level political outcomes on measure of genocide exposure. All models include Khmer Rouge zone fixed effects and robust standard errors.

	% women, party list		% women, council	
Grave sites × Southwest Zone	0.027**	0.030+	0.035***	0.029**
	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.007)	(0.009)
Grave sites × West Zone	0.040***	0.039*	0.035***	0.029**
	(0.010)	(0.016)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Mean elevation		0.004		−0.000
		(0.004)		(0.000)
Latitude		−0.028		−0.213
		(0.400)		(0.134)
Dist. to Phnom Penh		−0.000		−0.000*
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Dist. to provincial capital		0.000		0.000
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Median dist. to road		−0.000		0.000
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Major (secondary) school present		0.055		0.018
		(0.033)		(0.022)
Government office present		−0.017		0.016
		(0.064)		(0.024)
Observations		75	75	139	139

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; +$p < .1$

Table 2: OLS regressions of commune-level political outcomes on measure of genocide exposure. All models include robust standard errors. Observations limited to communes with centroids at most 10km from the West-Southwest border. (P-value for Southwest graves in column 2 is 0.058.)

	% FHH		% F. literacy	
Grave sites (≤5km)	1.303***	0.942***	4.508***	2.244***
	(0.188)	(0.198)	(0.361)	(0.314)
Mean elevation		−0.008**		−0.024***
		(0.003)		(0.006)
Latitude		−1.654**		−2.567**
		(0.508)		(0.826)
Dist. to Phnom Penh		−0.000		−0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Dist. to provincial capital		−0.000***		−0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Median dist. to road		0.000		−0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.00)
Constant	26.241***	49.385***	63.168***	112.543***
	(0.702)	(6.154)	(1.164)	(10.286)
Observations	1609	1609	1609	1609

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{+}p < .1$

Table 3: OLS regressions of socioeconomic outcomes on measure of genocide exposure (5km bandwidth) at the commune level. Khmer Rouge zone fixed effects and robust standard errors included.

	Women as business managers				Years of schooling for women			
	FHH		MHH		FHH		MHH	
Grave sites (≤5km)	0.037***	0.024*	0.024***	0.015**	0.430***	0.289***	0.466***	0.307***
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.048)	(0.046)
Mean elevation		−0.000		−0.000		−0.000		−0.001
		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.001)		(0.001)
Latitude		−0.032		−0.016		0.172		0.054
		(0.031)		(0.018)		(0.224)		(0.135)
Dist. to Phnom Penh		−0.000		−0.000		−0.000^{+}		−0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.000)
Dist. to provincial capital		−0.000**		−0.000*		−0.000***		−0.000***
		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.000)
Median dist. to road		−0.000		−0.000**		0.000		−0.000
		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.000)		(0.000)
Observations	2456	2456	8926	8926	1819	1819	6974	6974

$^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{+}p < .1$

Table 4: Regressions of household-level measures of female economic empowerment on measure of genocide exposure, by male-headed households (MHH) and female-headed households (FHH). Years of schooling for women are measured for women at least 15 years of age. Robust standard errors clustered at the village level. Household-level weights from the CSES database included. Khmer Rouge fixed effects included.

	% spending on education			% spending on female education			Education spending per woman/girl		
	All	FHH	MHH	All	FHH	MHH	All	FHH	MHH
Grave sites ($\leq$5km)	0.017***	0.012**	0.019***	0.003**	−0.001	0.004***	37.961***	12.355	43.729***
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(8.265)	(12.539)	(8.872)
Mean elevation	0.000	0.000	0.000	−0.000	0.000	−0.000$^+$	0.072	0.163	0.067
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.127)	(0.199)	(0.118)
Latitude	0.006	−0.002	0.009	0.000	−0.001	0.001	30.311	−2.127	39.302$^+$
	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.009)	(0.002)	(0.006)	(0.002)	(19.522)	(35.547)	(20.371)
Dist. to Phnom Penh	−0.000***	−0.000	−0.000***	−0.000	0.000	−0.000$^+$	−0.001***	−0.001*	−0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Dist. to provincial capital	−0.000***	−0.000***	−0.000***	−0.000***	−0.000**	−0.000***	−0.002***	−0.003***	−0.002***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.000)
Median dist. to road	0.000	0.000	0.000	−0.000	−0.000	−0.000	0.003	−0.003	0.004
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)
N	11382	2456	8926	11268	2456	8812	4561	781	3780

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; $^+p < .1$

Table 5: Regressions of household-level education spending on measure of genocide exposure, by male-headed households (MHH) and female-headed households (FHH). Education spending per woman/girl is reported in thousands of Cambodian riel. Robust standard errors clustered at the village level. Household-level weights from the CSES database included. Khmer Rouge fixed effects included. Education spending per woman/girl is measured as the total amount of education spending on women divided by the total number of women/girls receiving any education spending in a given household.

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