

The Price of Gold: Dowry and Death in India (Selim Gulesci, Sonia Bhalotra and Abhishek Chakravarty)

Abstract

Dowry is often adduced as an explanation of son preference in India, but there is little evidence that dowry motivates son-preferring behaviors. On the premise that gold is an integral part of dowry in India, we exploit a sharp unexpected rise in the price of gold in 1980 to investigate this. Using a difference-in-discontinuities design, we find that the gold price hike is mirrored in an increase in girl relative to boy mortality in the neonatal and infant period, and that surviving girls are shorter, consistent with a strengthening of the historic tendency of Indian parents to manipulate the sex ratio of surviving births in favor of sons. Using monthly time series data for 35 years, we similarly find that cyclical variation in gold prices is reflected in excess girl mortality and, since the introduction of prenatal sex determination technology, in the sex ratio at birth. This constitutes the first evidence that dowry costs lead parents to eliminate fetal and newborn girls, and on a scale much larger than "dowry deaths" among married women which have been the subject of public attention.