

NBER WORKING PAPER SERIES

ON THE ORIGINS OF GENDER ROLES:
WOMEN AND THE PLOUGH

Alberto F. Alesina
Paola Giuliano
Nathan Nunn

Working Paper 17098
<http://www.nber.org/papers/w17098>

NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH
1050 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
May 2011

We thank Samuel Bowles, David Clingingsmith, Esther Duflo, Raquel Fernandez, Nicole Fortin, Oded Galor, Pauline Grosjean, Judith Hellerstein, Edward Miguel, Rohini Pande, Louis Putterman, John Wallis, as well as seminar participants at the Bank of Italy, Brown University, Harvard University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, MIT, New York University, Sciences Po, UCLA Kaler Meeting, University of Oklahoma, Washington University St. Louis, World Bank, WAEHS, Stanford's SITE Conference, Coevolution of Behaviors and Institutions Conference, AEA Annual Meetings, Brookings Africa Growth Forum, NBER Political Economy Meeting, NBER Cohort Studies Meeting, and the IZA/Science Po Workshop on Trust, Civic Spirit and Economic Performance for valuable comments. We also thank Eva Ng for excellent research assistance. Giuliano gratefully acknowledges support from the UCLA Senate. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

NBER working papers are circulated for discussion and comment purposes. They have not been peer-reviewed or been subject to the review by the NBER Board of Directors that accompanies official NBER publications.

© 2011 by Alberto F. Alesina, Paola Giuliano, and Nathan Nunn. All rights reserved. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission provided that full credit, including © notice, is given to the source.

On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough
Alberto F. Alesina, Paola Giuliano, and Nathan Nunn
NBER Working Paper No. 17098
May 2011
JEL No. D03,J16,N30

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to better understand the historical origins of current differences in norms and beliefs about the appropriate role of women in society. We test the hypothesis that traditional agricultural practices influenced the historical gender division of labor and the evolution and persistence of gender norms. We find that, consistent with existing hypotheses, the descendants of societies that traditionally practiced plough agriculture, today have lower rates of female participation in the workplace, in politics, and in entrepreneurial activities, as well as a greater prevalence of attitudes favoring gender inequality. We identify the causal impact of traditional plough use by exploiting variation in the historical geo-climatic suitability of the environment for growing crops that differentially benefited from the adoption of the plough. Our IV estimates, based on this variation, support the findings from OLS. To isolate the importance of cultural transmission as a mechanism, we examine female labor force participation of second-generation immigrants living within the US.

Alberto F. Alesina
Department of Economics
Harvard University
Littauer Center 210
Cambridge, MA 02138
and IGIER
and also NBER
aalesina@harvard.edu

Nathan Nunn
Department of Economics
Harvard University
1805 Cambridge St
Cambridge, Ma 02138
and NBER
nnunn@fas.harvard.edu

Paola Giuliano
Anderson School of Management
UCLA
110 Westwood Plaza
C517 Entrepreneurs Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1481
and IZA
and also NBER
paola.giuliano@anderson.ucla.edu