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Q&A WITH

NIKHAR GAIKWAD, ERIN LIN AND NOAH ZUCKER (*Sage Paper Prize*)

What caused you to embark on this project?

This project has a serendipitous origin. Erin and Nikhar were presenting research at a conference on fieldwork titled, “In the Field: Political Science,” at the University of Rochester. Erin presented a paper related to the long-term legacies of conflict in Cambodia, and Nikhar presented a paper on the impact of matrilineal cultural norms on women’s political representation, with a concluding slide mentioning potential applications to the Cambodian case. Patriarchal norms are hard to disrupt, but periods of intense scarcity – like during the Cambodian genocide – can lead societies to abandon traditions that exclude women from the economic sphere, with salutary implications for women’s political representation. After several conversations, a plan was hatched to study this topic together, and Noah joined soon after.

What is one main thing you want the project to be remembered for ten years from now?

That communities develop new expectations of female behavior *once* the men and women in

traditional gender structures accept and take personal advantage of changing norms. Perhaps the most prevalent set of explanations for the impact of violence on women’s representation underscore the policies of post-war institutions (e.g., legislative quotas or democratic elections) that create opportunities for women to run for office. A burgeoning literature points to wartime female empowerment and its lingering effects on women’s preferences. What is missing from these accounts is an appreciation of the role of the remaining community members: how men and women in traditional domestic structures are also shaped by violence. Once these individuals find it beneficial to discard patriarchal norms, new avenues are created for the political advancement of women.

What in your data or findings surprised you the most? Why?

Though it emerged out of the theory, the strength of the findings for *male*-headed households was notable: in the wake of the genocide, women and girls became more autonomous and acquired substantially greater bargaining power even in traditional domestic structures with “senior males” present. These findings



provided striking evidence that the Cambodian genocide did more than drive widows into public life by necessity – it had enduring ideational and cultural impacts on how both women *and* men conceived of proper gender roles in the public domain.

What would you change or do differently if you went back and did this project again?

Conducting a truly multi-methods research design – which relied on in-depth ethnographic interviews with genocide survivors and political stakeholders, just as much as on large-*n* statistical analyses of the impact of violence on long-term indicators of women's economic autonomy and political representation – was new to us. It necessitated becoming proficient in field-based interview research techniques in sensitive environments while also analyzing original historical and contemporary datasets pertaining to one of the most horrific mass killings of the twentieth century. It would have been helpful to gain experience with a multi-methods design at a smaller scale before tackling such an expansive topic.

What is the biggest still unanswered question that emerges from your research?

There is still a lot to uncover about how cultural transmission works precisely: what kinds of information about female leaders are shared across households and generations, and when political resistance to female officeholders dissipates. In particular, we'd like to learn more about male backlash to female empowerment, and private transcripts might be easier to access with a male ethnographer, who can linger unobtrusively in areas such as coffee shops where men tend to congregate and gamble in Cambodia.

If another scholar does the same project ten years from now, do you think their findings would be different from yours? And if yes, in which ways?

A future study along the same lines would be an interesting test case for how changed norms endure over time. Will norms of gender equity grow stronger as more women become educated, economically active, and politically involved? Or will they fade, as genocide-era generations pass away or withdraw from public life? Our theory would anticipate the former, though identifying the *local* effects of genocidal violence may become increasingly difficult as people move out of afflicted communities, taking reformed gender expectations with them. ●