



Impacts of War Exposure at Different Life Stages on Health, Labor Market Choices, and Beliefs: Evidence from Sri Lanka

Dinafeisi, Aireti

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Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation

Name: DINAFEISI AIRETI

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Impacts of War Exposure at Different Life Stages on Health, Labor Market Choices, and

Beliefs: Evidence from Sri Lanka

(異なる年齢期における紛争被害が健康、職業選択、選好に与える影響：
スリランカの実証分析)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This dissertation assesses the impacts of exposure to the Sri Lankan Civil War on health, labor market choices, and beliefs among the affected population. By conducting three empirical analyses that focus on the fetal period, early childhood, and young adulthood, the findings suggest that the timing of exposure matters. Chapter 3 presents the first empirical analysis of this dissertation, focusing on war exposure during the fetal period and its effects on newborns' birthweight. To address the endogeneity concern arising from time-invariant unobserved characteristics shared across siblings such as genetic endowments and maternal health conditions, the study adopts a within-sibling comparison strategy. This approach eliminates confounding from these family-specific factors and allows the estimation to focus on variation in prenatal war exposure across siblings within the same household. The findings show that prenatal exposure to war reduces male births and lowers birthweight, with gender- and violence-specific patterns. More specifically, the results indicate that the loss in birthweight is primarily driven by girl siblings and property damage. The culling effect plausibly explains the results, indicating that natural selection allows only healthier boys to exceed the survival threshold and that boys have better health endowment at birth. The results are robust to a variety of robustness checks. To explore the channels behind the adverse effects, war exposure is differentiated into three categories: human victimization, property damage, and displacement; and only the effects of exposure to property damage are consistent, suggesting that the negative impact of prenatal war exposure on birthweight is not likely to be driven by maternal stress but by malnutrition during pregnancy.

There is a rich body of literature indicating early childhood is a critical period for human capital accumulation (Heckman, 2006; Cunha and Heckman, 2007; Currie and Almond, 2011). However, there has been relatively little research on the long-term effects of war on mental health due to data scarcity on both war exposure and mental health. To fill this particular research gap, Chapter 4 aims to investigate the long-term effects of war exposure during early childhood on adult mental health and labor market

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choices. The results indicate that experiencing property damage during early childhood is associated with poorer adult mental health outcomes and a higher likelihood of part-time employment, which is characterized by low and unstable earnings. The results of Oster's (2019) selection on the unobservables and the inclusion of the family addiction as a proxy for family mental health history partially account for the intergenerational transmission of mental conditions, indicating that the baseline results are robust and that omitted variable bias is not likely to be a concern. However, the analysis cannot rule out the possibility of reverse causality, because a key caveat is that retrospective reports of war exposure during early childhood were provided by the respondents themselves, which may be affected by their mental conditions. For instance, individuals with poor mental health may report victimization differently (exaggerating or minimizing) depending on their mental conditions or coping strategies. Therefore, even though the victimization occurred in early childhood, the reverse causality may still exist through the way individuals report their experiences. Thus, caution is needed when interpreting the relationship. Nonetheless, while this analysis cannot fully address the reverse causality, the robust results across all specifications suggest that the findings are not solely driven by this issue.

Chapter 5 focuses on the impressionable years, which is the period between 18 and 25 years of age. During this period, people are highly sensitive to the political attitude changes and they persist relatively stable for the rest of their lives (Manheim, 1952; Krosnick and Alwin, 1989). The empirical study presented in this chapter examines the effects of exposure to war during this critical period on beliefs and inter-ethnic preferences. To control for the intergenerational transmission of parental beliefs and interethnic attitudes within households, the study employs a within-sibling comparison strategy. The findings suggest that exposure to war during young adulthood has long-term consequences. In particular, the results indicate that experiencing property damage during this period leads to a higher preference for distributing resources to outgroup members. Since the war is ethnic in nature, exploring

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heterogeneity across ethnicities can provide further insight into understanding the impact of war and offer political implications. However, the heterogeneous effects show that the optimistic baseline results are mainly driven by the Tamil group. Non-Tamils experiencing war violence during impressionable years exhibit lower internal locus of control, i.e., the extent to which they feel control over life, are more likely to identify with their ethnicities rather than the national identity as Sri Lankans, and exhibit higher out-group intolerance, which is captured by the preference for the neighbors from outgroups. However, these effects should be interpreted with caution, as there is limited variation in this particular subgroup, i.e., non-Tamils exposed to property damage during impressionable years; thus, the result is sensitive to sampling errors and may be driven by a small number of observations. On the other hand, the consistent positive answers given by the Tamil individuals may also be an indication of a closely monitored political environment. Given their sensitive position in the post-war environment, following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Tamil individuals may feel extra cautious when expressing their opinions related to sensitive topics, also known as the “willingness to self-censor (WtSC)”. As evidenced by Etchegary et al. (2019), Chileans who have experienced political repression during their impressionable years are more likely to withhold their opinions when the audience may have different points of view, i.e., at higher levels of WtSC. They argued that when citizens withhold their political opinion due to fear of potential consequences, the freedom of expression in a democracy is compromised. Similarly, Tamil individuals may lack trust in the survey process and fear of retaliation, even when same-ethnic enumerators were employed for each household, suggesting a possible restricted post-war political environment in the war-affected regions.

Based on the findings summarized from the empirical analyses above, three policy implications can be derived from this dissertation. The first empirical evidence presented in Chapter 3 shows that property damage during pregnancy reduces male births and lowers birthweight among girl-siblings, suggesting that the threats of

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maternal malnutrition need to be addressed by ensuring food security in war zones. The government should also prioritize postnatal care for newborns and increase the financial support to families with pregnant women and infants during wartime, with particular attention to families with female children since they have lower health endowments compared to their male counterparts. Such interventions are critical not only for reducing low birthweight and postnatal mortality but also for mitigating the long-term intergenerational effects of war.

Secondly, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) should be effectively delivered to the conflict-affected population. Chapter 4 investigates the long-term effects of war exposure during early childhood on mental health and labor market choices. The results suggest that exposure to war in the early years of life leads to adverse mental health outcomes and a higher likelihood of engaging in informal employment. One possibility is that the worsening mental health conditions drive people to work in part-time jobs, which reduces labor productivity and impedes post-war economic recovery. Policymakers need to ensure the provision of MHPSS to the affected population to mitigate the negative mental health consequences and labor market outcomes, in addition to providing vocational training to empower affected individuals with new skills and equip them for more stable and productive livelihoods.

Lastly, the evidence from the third analytical chapter suggests the importance for policymakers designing policies promoting ethnic reconciliation and fostering an inclusive post-war social environment in the war-affected regions in Sri Lanka. As “development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom” (Sen, 1999), the extent to which an individual can achieve in life depends not only on economic opportunities but also on a healthy body, access to education, a sense of agency, and political liberties, among many others. When citizens self-censor due to fear of retaliation, particularly in post-conflict societies where ethnic divisions are historically prominent, freedom of speech may only apply to those who feel safe expressing their opinions or when they know what kind of responses are politically safe, implying the

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fundamental element of democracy is compromised. While political freedom helps promote economic security (Sen, 1999), a sensitive political environment could hinder the recovery process. Policy efforts may be directed toward providing a comfortable environment for the affected population to process trauma and pursue healing in order to promote ethnic reconciliation. Traditional communal support and religious rituals can be helpful for processing grief and help those who survived the war to reconnect with each other and build resilience within the community (Derges, 2013).

While this dissertation investigates the effects of exposure to war at different stages of life on health, labor market choices, and beliefs, several limitations remain. Causal interpretations should be made with caution regarding the relationship between early-year exposure to war on mental health and labor market choices. Similarly, the effects of war exposure during impressionable years on beliefs and preferences also require careful interpretation due to limited variation in the treatment variables. Future research could benefit from experimental designs to capture politically sensitive outcomes while protecting vulnerable groups and deriving causal inference in such settings.

Name of Academic Adviser: Associate Professor Takahiro ITO