

**Gender, Competitiveness and Socialization at a Young Age:  
Evidence from a Matrilineal and a Patriarchal Society**

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Abstract: Recent literature in economics presents evidence that men are more competitively inclined than women. Since top-level careers usually require competitiveness, competitiveness differences provide an explanation for gender gaps in wages and differences in occupational choice. A natural question is whether women are born less competitive, or whether they become so through the process of socialization. To pinpoint when in the socialization process the difference arises, we compare the competitiveness of children in matrilineal and patriarchal societies. We find that while there is no difference at any age in the matrilineal society, girls become less competitive around puberty in the patriarchal society.

JEL Codes: C93, J16, D03.

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## I. Introduction

In most societies around the world men earn more money than women and are more likely to hold high status jobs.<sup>1</sup> Recent findings suggest that some of the gap may result from different tendencies of men and women to compete.<sup>2</sup> A stylized fact in this literature is that increasing the competitiveness of the environment results in differential change in effort between men and women, with men putting in more effort when the incentives are competitive. Such data patterns might provide insights into why we observe a higher fraction of women than men among, for example, grammar school teachers, but the reverse among high level executives.

Gender differences in competitiveness may have some evolutionary reasons, and are not unique to humans; a large body of literature in evolutionary biology and socio-biology documents differences in competitiveness between males and females in many species.<sup>3</sup> While the evolutionary or “natural” basis of gender differences is well documented, our understanding of the effect of culture on the gender gap is more limited. To that end, Gneezy, Leonard and List (2009) study two distinct societies, the Massai of Tanzania and the Khasi of Northeast India. The comparison between the two societies is important because they represent very different cultures in terms of gender roles. While the Massai are a textbook example of patriarchal society, the Khasi are a matrilineal society. The main objective in that study was to examine whether women and men in more gender-equal societies compete at a different level than women and men in non-equal societies.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Altonji and Blank (1999); Blau and Kahn (1992; 2000); Blau, Ferber, and Winkler (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Gneezy, Niederle and Rustichini (2003); Gneezy and Rustichini (2004); Niederle and Vedsterlund (2007).

<sup>3</sup> See Knight (2002) or Tregenza and Wedell (2002) for recent overviews. The debate is a classic in the field: see Darwin (1871), Bateman (1948) and Trivers (1972).

Gneezy, Leonard and List (2009) find that the gender gap in the patriarchal society is similar to that found in western societies. However, the gender gap is reversed in the Khasi matrilineal society, where women compete more than men. This result provides strong evidence against the nature straw man, showing that socialization is also important in determining competitiveness. An important question that is left open is at what age the gender difference begins. Answering this question could help us in both understanding the source of the gender difference and devising potential policies to reduce it.

To that end, the current paper reports the results of experiments with 7 to 15 year-old children in matrilineal and patriarchal villages in Northeast India. The main finding is that there are no gender or society differences in our experiments at the age of 7, but that by the age of 15, there is a strong gender gap. The average behavior of children in the matrilineal society does not change relative to that of the 7 year-old. In particular, boys and girls are equally likely to choose to compete. In the patriarchal society, on the other hand, 15 year-old boys are significantly more likely to compete than 7 year-old boys, and the reverse is true for girls. As a result, we observe a strong gender gap in the patriarchal society at the age of 15. This gap is similar to the one found with adults. Hence, it appears that the source of the gender gap is in the period when the children hit puberty.

Apart from the contribution of our findings to the understanding of the source of the gender gap, the results also provide important insights into the design of public policies. They suggest that a policy maker interested in reducing the gender gap should target children around the puberty age, in which the policy might be most effective.

## **II. Brief Societal Background**

We ran our experiment in matrilineal and patriarchal villages in the same general region of Meghalaya in Northeast India. The matrilineal villagers in our study belong to the Khasi tribe, while the patriarchal villagers are of the Kharbi tribe. The Kharbi are considered to be the closest to the Khasi in terms of biology and origin. The two tribes are located in the same region and engage in similar economic activities. Yet, the social organization of the two societies is quite different. In the Khasi, inheritance and clan membership always follow the female lineage through the youngest daughter. Family life is organized around the mother's house headed by the grandmother who lives with her unmarried daughters, her youngest daughter (even if she is married), and her youngest daughter's children. Additionally, her unmarried, divorced, or widowed brothers and sons reside in the home. Even in cases when married men reside with their wife's family, they spend much, if not most, of their time in the mother's or sisters' household (Van Ham, 2001, Nakane 1967). Women are therefore raised from infancy in their mother's or grandmother's home. Importantly, the youngest daughter never leaves and eventually becomes the head of the household, whereas older daughters usually form separate households adjacent to their mother's household. Further, women never join the household of their husband's family and some men leave their mother's household to join their wife's household. In some cases, men will practice duolocal marriage (in which they live in both their mother's and wife's households). Men, and in particular husbands, frequently hold roles that seem to mirror those of women in patriarchal societies. The Khasi husband dwells in a household in which he has no authority or property, and is expected to work for the gain of his wife's family. The status of men in Khasi society has

in fact been the source of a men's rights movement (Ahmed, 1994; Van Ham, 2000; Nonbgri, 1988).

The Kharbi society, on the other hand, is organized in the usual patriarchal structure, in that men possess ownership of the land and have power over monetary decisions of the household. Lineage also descends through the male, and women move to the household of their husband when they get married. These differences in social structure provide a unique opportunity for studying how attitudes toward competition across gender vary over culture. Having data on the choices of children of different ages can especially help us understand the time course of the gender differences, by giving insight into the potential effects of gender socialization in each type of society.

### **III. Experimental Design:**

We collected data from four villages in the Meghalaya district of Northeast India in November 2008. Two of these villages were matrilineal, and two were patriarchal. In total, 318 children aged 7-15 participated.<sup>4</sup> The children were recruited through an announcement made in the village school, and with the consent of their parents/guardians. We have data from 75 girls and 71 boys in the patriarchal villages, and from 76 girls and 96 boys in the matrilineal villages.<sup>5</sup>

After showing up for the experiment, children were randomly assigned ID numbers, and instructions were explained to them in the local language (Khasi or Kharbi,

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<sup>4</sup> 5 additional participants were excluded from the analysis because they were below the age limit of 7. Inclusion of those observations does not change the results.

<sup>5</sup> Since the participant pool consisted of children in the village school, our sample is thinner in the older age groups in our age range because of attrition.

depending on tribe).<sup>6</sup> The experimental task was throwing tennis balls into a bucket that was placed 10 feet away. This task was chosen because it is simple to explain and implement, and previous work (Gneezy, Leonard, List (2009)) had established that there are no gender differences in ability, which is also confirmed by our findings. As expected, however, task performance improves with age, and we therefore use performance as a control in our regressions.

The children were told that they would have 5 chances to throw a ball into the bucket, and could choose between two payment options. The choice of incentives was the only choice the participants in our experiment were asked to make. The piece-rate option paid 10 Indian Rupees per successful shot (the ball had to enter the bucket and stay in it), and only depended on the participant's own performance.<sup>7</sup> The second option was a tournament payment scheme in which earnings depended on the comparison of the subject's performance to that of a randomly-matched subject from another group of participants. This option paid 30 Rupees per successful shot if and only if the participant outperformed the randomly selected participant that he/she was matched with. In case of a tie the subject who chose the tournament option was paid 10 Rupees per successful shot; if the subject was less successful than the opponent then he/she was paid nothing.

After the task was explained, the children were taken into a room in groups, where there were buckets placed 10 feet away from a line. Each child knew that they would be matched with someone from outside their group. They were (privately) asked their choice of payment scheme, and were also asked about their age and their grade in

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<sup>6</sup> Instructions in English are provided in the appendix.

<sup>7</sup> Ten Rupees were about 25 American cents at the time, and about an hour wage at the villages we studied. This level of incentives was chosen in order to provide high enough motivation, without causing choking under pressure (Ariely et al, 2009).

school. After this, the children completed the task and were directed to another location where they were paid their earnings in cash. As promised, the children were never given the opportunity to learn with whom they were paired.

#### **IV. Results**

Figure I and Table I shows the frequency of competition choice across gender, age and societal structure. We see no significant differences in competitive behavior across gender or culture for the younger children aged 7-9 or mid-aged children aged 10-12.<sup>8</sup> However, by the age of 13-15 patriarchal girls exhibit a significantly lower propensity to compete compared to boys of the same age in the same villages ( $p < 0.05$ ). Older boys in the patriarchal villages also compete significantly more than younger boys in the same patriarchal villages. Thus overall competitive behavior differs across gender in the patriarchal villages, where boys become relatively more competitive, and girls become relatively less competitive as they get older. In the matrilineal villages we find no statistical differences in any of the age groups, though we do see a tendency for older girls to become more competitive and boys to become relatively less competitive.

<Insert Table I>

Table II presents the marginal effects of a logistic regression. The coefficients reflect the change in probability to compete in percentage points if the characteristics change from false to true. The reference point is patriarchal boys aged 10 to 12 years of

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<sup>8</sup> All tests of differences in means reported in the results sections are the findings of a non parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

age. We find no overall significant effect on the margin of gender, age or culture, but we do reveal interesting and significant patterns.<sup>9</sup>

<Insert Table II>

We find no gender or socialization effects on competitive behavior in children below the age of 13. Interestingly, however, while the older matrilineal boys do not have a significantly higher probability of competing than older matrilineal girls ( $p < 0.36$ , Wald test), older patriarchal boys have a significantly higher probability of competing compared to older patriarchal girls ( $p < 0.01$ , Wald test).

For robustness, we also run regressions using age as a continuous variable instead of age group dummies, allow for village level effects, control for school grade, gender of experimenter, and research assistant running the session as well. None of these controls or specifications alters the main result. In addition, and in order to explore any possible effects of the undersampling of post-puberty children in our data, we revisited two of the villages in 2009, recruiting more teens. Acknowledging that we might have contaminated behavior by returning to the same villages we do not include this data in our main analyses, though it confirms our results. Figure 1B and Tables 1B and 2B in Appendix B display the competition patterns over age with the addition of these data.

Overall, we see no difference in competitive behavior across gender and culture for children aged 7-12, but we do see significant differences in our older group, aged 13-15. In particular, in the patriarchal society boys in this age group are more likely to choose to compete than girls.

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<sup>9</sup> Running the regression without using performance as a regressor does not change the results.



The differences in children's behavior can be contrasted with the behavior of adults in these societies, as reported in Gneezy, Leonard and List (2009), who find essentially the same results as we find with the older children: adult men in the patriarchal society choose to compete more than women, while in the matrilineal society they do not.

Our findings are interesting in comparison to some other work on the propensity of kids to compete. Gneezy and Rustichini (2004) compared the speed of 10-11 year old kids in running alone and running side by side with another kid during a physical education class in Israel. They report that girls were not affected by running next to another kid, but boys invested more effort (ran faster) when they were matched. Two recent experiments tested this finding in other countries. Dreber et al. (2009) finds that 7-10 year-old boys and girls in Sweden have similar reactions (in terms of performance) to competition in running, skipping rope and dancing tasks. On the other hand, Sutter and Rützler (2010) find that boys choose to compete more (in math and running tasks) across all ages in a sample of three to eighteen year old Austrian children. These studies lend further support to the hypothesis that culture and social structure are important determinants of the gender gap in competitiveness over age.

## **V. Conclusion**

In most cultures men are more likely to have a successful career outside of the household than women. One explanation for this difference is that men are more competitive than women, and having a successful career requires competitiveness. This

begs the question of nature versus nurture: are women born less competitive, or do they become so through the process of socialization?

The gender difference in competitiveness is based on findings from patriarchal societies (e.g., Gneezy, Niederle and Rustichini, 2003). In a recent paper, Gneezy, Leonard and List (2009) report results comparing men and women's tendency to compete in matrilineal and patriarchal societies. The main result is that in matrilineal societies women are not less competitive than men. This implies that socialization has an important role in creating the gender difference.

An important open question is at what stage in the socialization process the gender difference arises. By comparing competitiveness of children in matrilineal and patriarchal societies, we show that the difference starts around puberty. Moreover, most of the changes during this period of life occur within the patriarchal society, in which boys become more competitive with age while girls become less competitive.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from improving our understanding of basic human tendencies, this finding could also help in guiding public policies. While providing a recommendation on which specific policy should be adopted to reduce the gender gap is outside the scope of the current paper, the results imply that such policies should be designed with a special focus on children around puberty, since this is the period in which the gap seems to be arising. Booth and Nolen (2009), for example, find evidence that girls in single-sex schools are more competitive and risk-taking. If such a policy is to be undertaken, our findings suggest that it may not be necessary to implement it at the early childhood level but

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note the possibility that socialization might act along with biological forces in determining the difference in the matrilineal and patriarchal societies around puberty. According to the gender intensification theory in psychology (Hill and Lynch (1983)), the physical changes of puberty reinforce socialization agents to increase pressure for sex-typed behavior (Rose and Rudolf (2006)).

closer to the teenage period. Further research that studies the effects of different policies on girls and boys of different age is warranted to shed more light into these issues.

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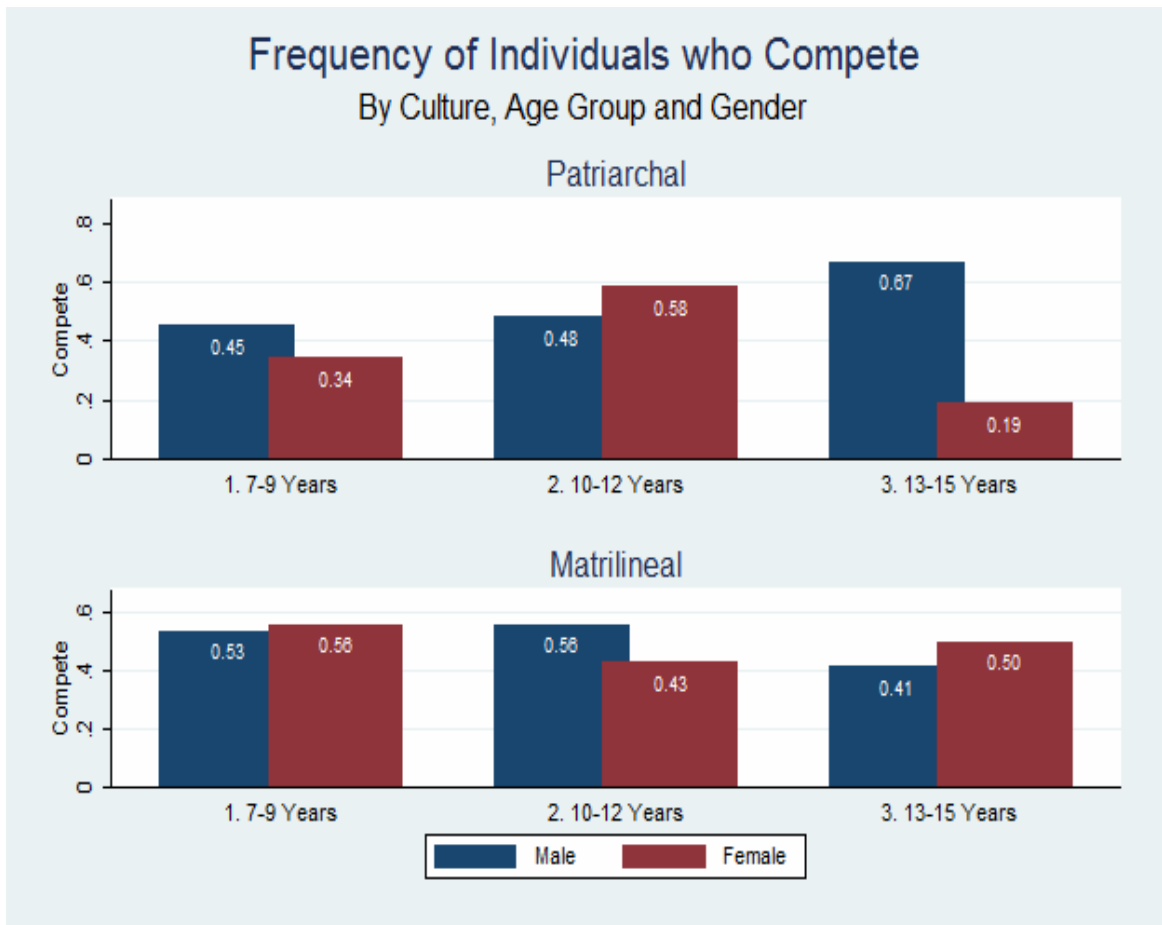
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**Figure I:**



**TABLE I: Frequency of Competitive Choices**

	Age Group			All
	1. 7-9 Years old	2. 10-12 Years old	3. 13-15 Years old	
Patriarchal Girls	0.34 (0.08) [35]	0.58 (0.10) [24]	0.18 (0.10) [16]	0.38 (0.06) [75]
Patriarchal Boys	0.45 (0.09) [31]	0.48 (0.10) [25]	0.66 (0.13) [15]	0.51 (0.06) [71]
Matrilineal Girls	0.55 (0.1) [27]	0.42 (0.08) [35]	0.50 (0.14) [14]	0.48 (0.06) [76]
Matrilineal Boys	0.53 (0.08) [45]	0.56 (0.09) [34]	0.42 (0.12) [17]	0.52 (0.05) [96]
All	0.47 (0.04) [138]	0.51 (0.05) [118]	0.44 (0.06) [62]	

Note: means as main number, standard deviation in parentheses, and number of observations in brackets.

**TABLE II: Marginal Effects of Logistic Regression**

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Younger	-0.03 (0.17)
Older	0.21 (0.20)
Girls	0.16 (0.17)
Younger girls	-0.27 (0.21)
Older girls	-0.51*** (0.07)
Matrilineal	-0.06 (0.20)
Younger Matrilineal	-0.03 (0.20)
Older Matrilineal	-0.30 (0.19)
Matrilineal girls	-0.28 (0.17)
Younger Matrilineal girls	0.37* (0.19)
Older Matrilineal girls	0.55*** (0.05)
Performance	-0.03 (0.03)

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Note: Younger denotes children aged 7-9, Older denote children aged 13-15. Robust standard errors in parentheses; clustering was used on each group sent in for competition. Controls for village and room-level effects added. \*'s denote significance at levels; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Based on 318 observations.



## APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTIONS

### Instructions:

Welcome. Today you are going to play a game that takes 20 minutes. By playing the game, you have the chance earn money. All the money you earn will be yours to keep. It will be paid to you, in private, after the game ends. No one will know how much money you earned, unless you choose to tell them yourself. Now we will explain the rules of the game. The rules are very simple. Pay very careful attention to these instructions because the better you understand them, the more money you can earn. Please do not talk with each other from this point on. If you have a question, you can raise your hand and ask. Otherwise, please be quiet and listen carefully just like you listen to your teacher in school.

The task that you will do is to throw this ball into this bucket from this line. (*Show them the ball, bucket and line*). You will have 5 chances to throw balls. Before you start throwing, you will be asked to choose between two ways of earning money:

**Option 1 (Individual payment):** If you choose this, you receive 10 Rupees for each ball you throw in successfully. One ball in, you get 10 Rupees. 2 balls in, you get 20 Rupees. 3 balls, 30 rupees and so on...

Do you have any questions?

**Option 2 (Competition):** If you choose this option, you will be competing with another kid. Every one of you will be matched with either a girl or a boy from another group, who will be playing the same game (throwing balls). We will not tell you who the kid you will be competing with is. If you can throw more balls in than your opponent, you will win the competition. If you throw fewer balls in than your opponent, you will lose the competition. For example, if you throw in 3 balls successfully and your opponent throws 2 balls successfully, you win the competition and your opponent loses. If you throw in 3 balls successfully and your opponent 4 balls successfully, you lose the competition and your opponent wins. If you and your opponent make the same number of successful shots, it's a tie.

Now, if you choose to compete and you lose, you do not get any money. But if you win, you will be paid 30 rupees for every ball you got in, instead of 10. That is, for one successful throw, you will get 30 rupees. For 2 successful throws, you will get 60 rupees. For 3 successful throws, you will get 90 rupees and so on. But you will only receive this if you beat your opponent. If you do worse than your opponent, you get zero. If you both succeed the same number of times, it is a tie. In that case you will get 10 rupees for each successful throw.

Do you have any questions?

In a few minutes, we will take you inside to play this game. When you go inside, we will ask you privately which option you would like to choose. We will never tell anyone which option you chose. We are going to keep this as a secret even after the game is over.

Do you have any questions? Now, let's see if we all understand:

*(Ask control questions to the whole group)*

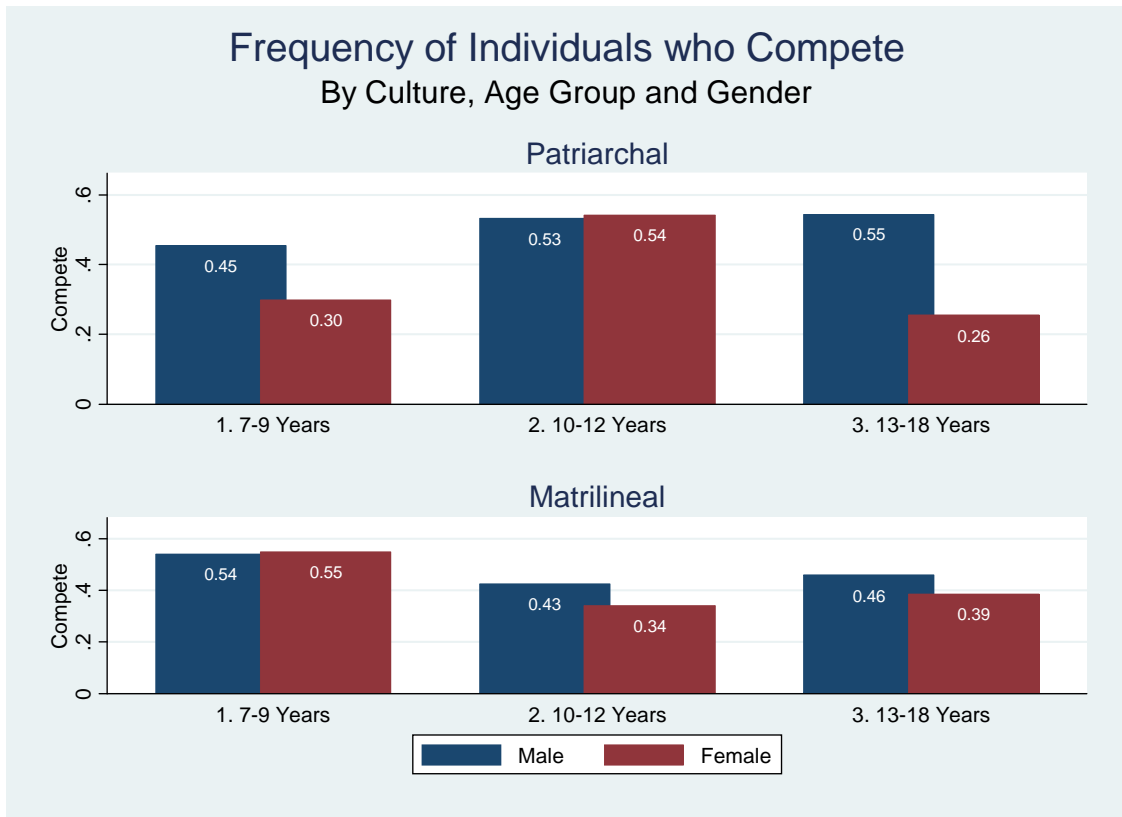
- “If I choose the individual payment (that is, if I do not choose competition), and I throw in 3 balls successfully, how many rupees do I get?”
- “If I choose to compete and I throw in 3 balls successfully and my opponent makes 2 balls, how many rupees do I get?”
- “If I choose to compete and I throw in 4 balls successfully and my opponent throws in 5 balls, how many rupees do I get?”

Do you have any questions?

OK, we will now take you inside to play the game and make your choices.

APPENDIX B: ADDING ADDITIONAL DATA

Figure I B: Pooling Data from Revisited Villages



**TABLE 1B: Frequency of Competitive Choices,  
with Data From Revisited Villages Pooled**

	Age Group			All
	1. 7-9 Years old	2. 10-12 Years old	3. 13-18 Years old	
Patriarchal Girls	0.30 (0.07) [40]	0.54 (0.09) [35]	0.26 (0.06) [47]	0.35 (0.04) [122]
Patriarchal Boys	0.45 (0.09) [33]	0.53 (0.09) [30]	0.55 (0.08) [44]	0.51 (0.05) [107]
Matrilineal Girls	0.55 (0.09) [29]	0.34 (0.06) [64]	0.39 (0.07) [49]	0.40 (0.04) [142]
Matrilineal Boys	0.54 (0.07) [46]	0.43 (0.06) [68]	0.46 (0.06) [63]	0.47 (0.04) [177]
All	0.49 (0.04) [148]	0.43 (0.04) [197]	0.41 (0.03) [203]	

Note: means as main number, standard deviation in parentheses, and number of observations in brackets. The pooled data contain observations from one matrilineal and one patriarchal revisited village, in which an exact replication of our experiment in 2008 was done.

**TABLE 2B: Marginal Effects of Logistic Regression,****Data from Revisited Villages Pooled**


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Younger	-0.10 (0.14)
Older	0.02 (0.16)
Girls	0.03 (0.15)
Younger girls	-0.19 (0.18)
Older girls	-0.32** (0.13)
Matrilineal	-0.03 (0.23)
Younger Matrilineal	0.13 (0.19)
Older Matrilineal	0.05 (0.18)
Matrilineal girls	-0.13 (0.17)
Younger Matrilineal girls	0.29 (0.22)
Older Matrilineal girls	0.37** (0.16)
Performance	-0.02 (0.02)

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Note: Younger denotes children aged 7-9, Older denote children aged 13-15. Robust standard errors in parentheses; clustered at the level of groups sent to competition. Controls for village and room-level effects added. \*'s denote significance at levels; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Based on 548 observations.