

# Polygyny, Inequality, and Social Unrest

*Plural marriage, bred of inequality, begets violence*

The Economist, Dec 19, 2017

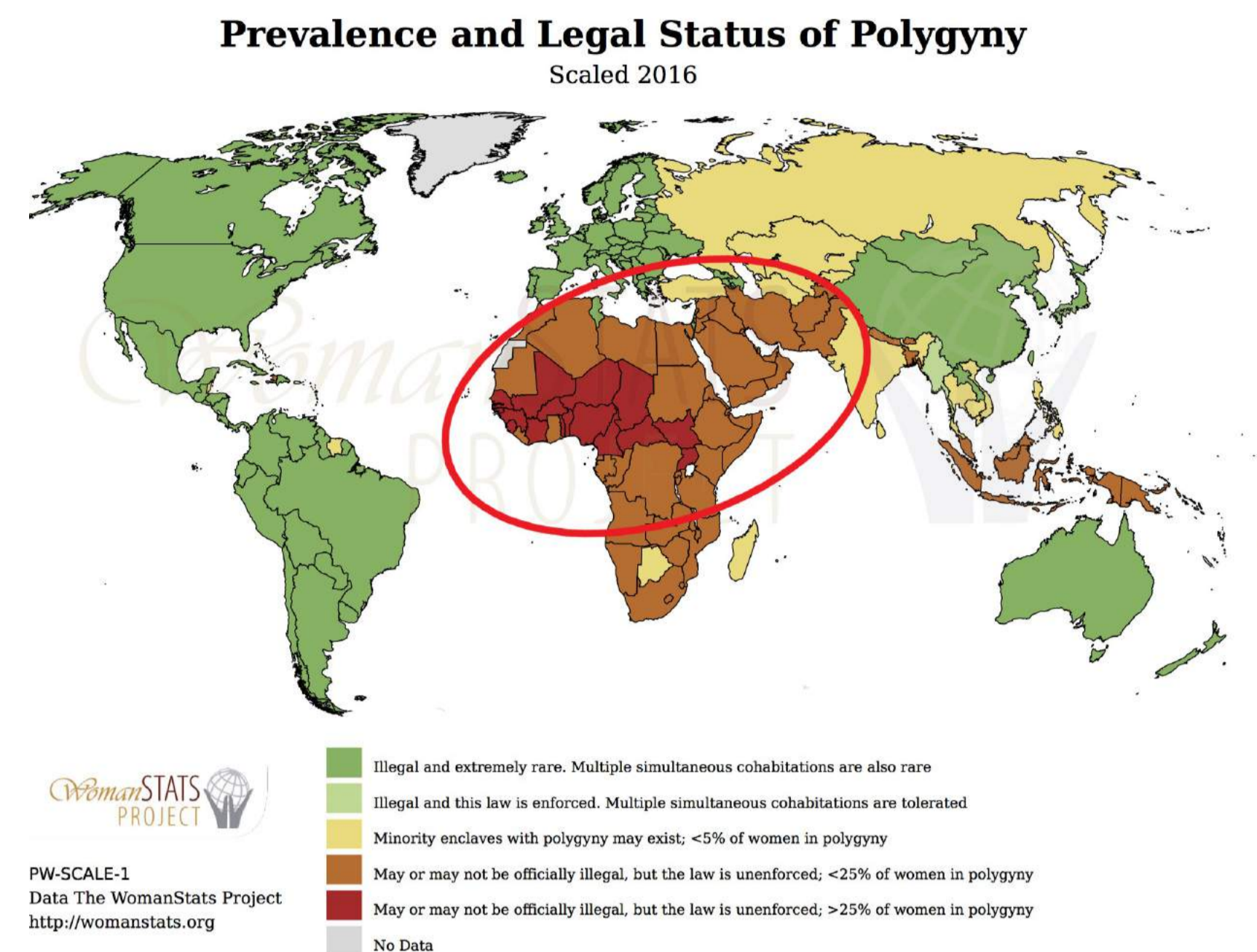
## Introduction

Polygyny may be associated with different kinds of inequality...

- Vertical inequality
- Horizontal inequality
- Gender inequality

Related literature: Polygyny ⇒ inequality (obstructions) on the marriage market ⇒ conflict/violence

(e.g., Henrich et al., 2012; Kanazawa, 2009; Koos and Neupert-Wentz, 2020)



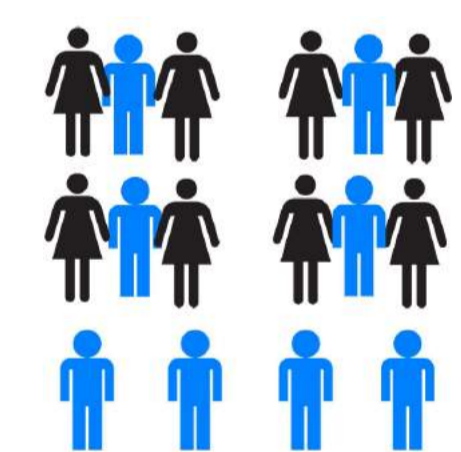
**Does polygyny and its associated manifestations of inequality —directly or indirectly— affect the likelihood of social unrest?**

## Contribution

- Broader theoretical perspective on inequality and polygyny
- Correlative evidence:
  - New data set for inequality within the elite (*inheritance in polygynous societies*)
  - Focus on 41 African countries with different levels of polygyny
  - Differentiate results by type of inequality and type of unrest (Violent, non-violent, organized and spontaneous unrest)

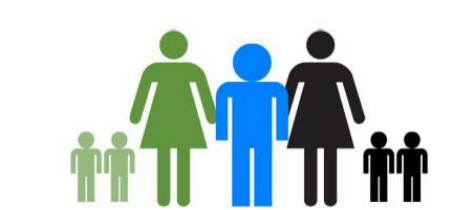
## Polygyny and Inequality

### Vertical inequality between elite and non-elite men



- Individual-level grievances:
  - Reproduction, productivity, social status & mobility
  - Ex.: Boko Haram, Sierra Leone, Saudi Arabia, South Africa
  - Reinforced at societal level
- Conditional on mobilization

### Horizontal inequality within the polygynous elite



- Competition for resources (e.g. among wives, for bride prices among sons) (e.g. Rossi, 2019; Gibson and Gurmu, 2011)
- Most intense for generational succession
  - Very unequal (primogeniture, e.g. South Africa), unequal (ranking of wives, e.g. Uganda), rather equal (Islamic family law)
- Destabilization of elite / Mobilization of non-elite

### Gender inequality



- Polygyny ⇒ Gender inequality: Patriarchal values, bride prices and patrilineality, higher spousal age gaps & fertility rates (e.g. McDermott, 2015a; Hudson et al., 2015)
- Gender inequality ⇒ Systematic discrimination and acceptance of violence in the society (e.g. McDermott, 2015b; Bjarnegard and Melander, 2017)
- Gender inequality ⇒ Interstate and intrastate conflict more likely (e.g. Hudson et al., 2009; Caprioli and Boyer, 2001)

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## Hypotheses

- H1:** Vertical inequality: Higher risk for *violent* and *organized* unrest in polygynous societies.
- H2a:** Horizontal inequality: Higher risk for *organized unrest* in polygynous societies.
- H2b:** For trickle down effects of horizontal inequality, requires resources for mobilization.
- H3:** Gender inequality by itself or in combination with polygyny, increases the risk for *violent unrest*.

## Data and Methods

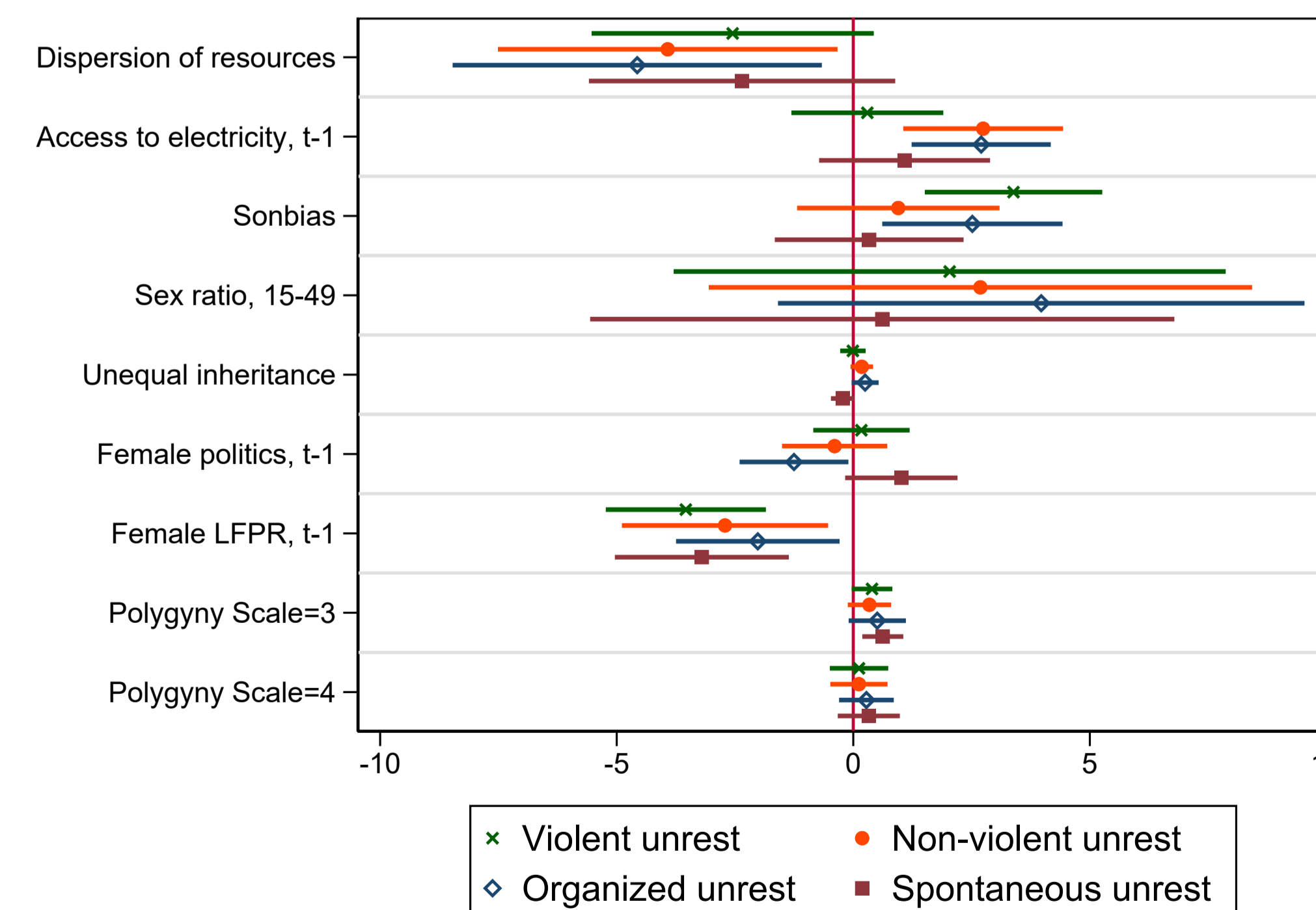
**Incidence of social unrest** from *Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD)* for 1990–2014.  
⇒ Logistic regression with clustered standard errors and time polynomials  
⇒ 932 Observations

Vertical inequality	Dispersion of economic power resources (time invariant, Vanhanen, 1990) Access to electricity (WDI) Sex Ratio (age 15-49) (UN) Sonbias (OECD, SIGI)
Horizontal inequality	Own coding of inheritance laws and practices in polygynous families (from '0'-equal to '3'-strict concentration on one heir)
Gender inequality	Female labor force participation (WDI) Female political participation (VDEM), alternative: economic and political rights (CIRI)

- **Polygyny** (legality and prevalence), from WomanStats in 2005-2010.
  - Categorical variable: low level, medium level and high level of polygyny
- **Controls:** Ongoing conflict, GDP per capita, population size, mountainous terrain, OPEC membership, unstable government, democracy, religious fractionalization, population belonging to excluded ethnic groups, neighboring countries with unrest events

## Results

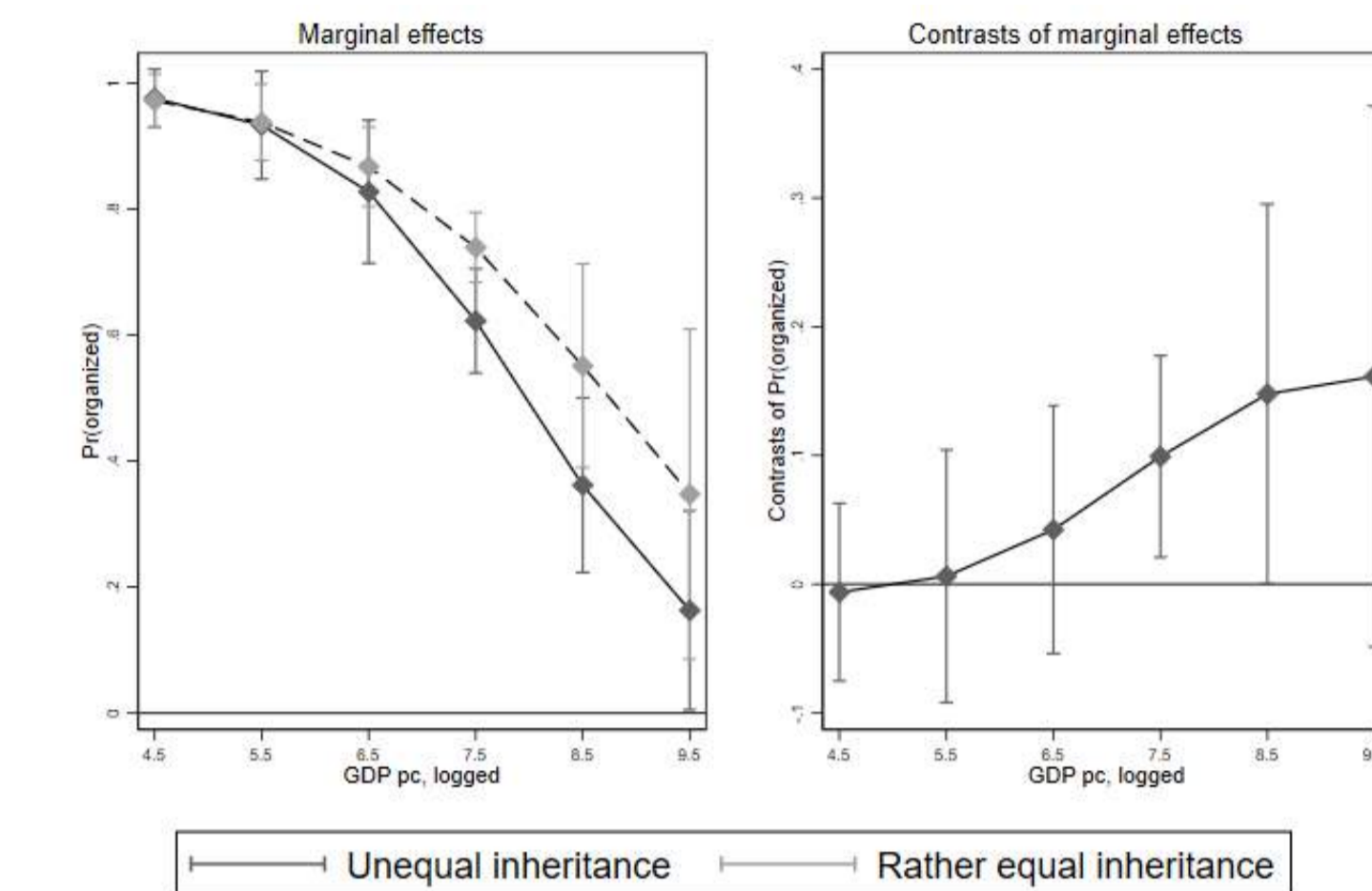
### Incidence of social unrest



Note: All control variables included. 90% confidence intervals displayed.

- H1: Less dispersed resources ⇒ higher risk for non-violent and organized unrest
- H2a: No significance for a direct effect of horizontal inequality
- H3: Gender inequality (lower female labor force participation) ⇒ Unrest risk (all forms) is higher
- H3: Female political participation increases the risk for spontaneous unrest, but not for others

## Horizontal inequality and mobilization



Note: Marginal effects and their contrasts for the interaction effect of polygyny and GDP per capita in the baseline, 90% confidence intervals.

**H2b** ⇒ Mobilization requires resources ⇒ Capability of elite ⇒ For higher levels of GDP, the risk of unrest is higher for high levels of horizontal inequality.

## Theoretical and empirical challenges

- Strategic behavior of the elite ⇒ Not supported by empirical tests
- Male compromise theory ⇒ Elites may restrict polygyny to pacify society?
- Reverse causality ⇒ Not supported by empirical tests
- Does population growth make polygyny viable? ⇒ Not supported by empirical tests
- Robust results: in a linear model, a count model for the number of events, controlling for youth bulges and GINI, alternative democracy or female political empowerment measures

## Conclusion

- We argue that the institution of polygynous marriages is tied to three different forms of inequality
- This potentially affects the stability of the society
- Correlative evidence supports this argumentation:
  - Higher/medium levels of polygyny are associated with a higher likelihood of social unrest
  - Gender inequality and vertical economic inequality coincide with more social unrest
  - Strong horizontal inequality comes along with higher risk of non-violent and organized unrest if GDP per capita is high enough

[Get the working paper here](#)

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