

**Social Norms as a Barrier to Women's Employment
in Developing Countries**

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses cultural barriers to women's participation and success in the labor market in developing countries. The author begins by describing how gender norms influence the relationship between economic development and female employment, as well as how gender norms vary substantially across societies at the same level of economic development. She then examines several specific gender-related social norms and how they constrain women's employment. She presents examples of policies aimed at dismantling these cultural barriers to female employment and the impacts they have.

1 Introduction

Globally about one out of every two adult women participates in the labor force, compared to three out of every four men (World Bank, 2020).¹ Women who do participate in the labor market earn less than their male counterparts, on average. This article discusses cultural barriers to women’s participation and success in the labor market, with a focus on developing countries.

Engaging in market labor does not imply greater well-being; a person might prefer not to be employed. In addition, women contribute more than men to domestic chores and child care, and this household labor also creates economic value (Beneria, 1981). Nonetheless, this article focuses on women’s market labor, which is of policy interest because paid employment often confers more autonomy and influence in the family and in society than unpaid household labor does (Sen, 1990; Kessler-Harris, 2003; Kabeer, 2008). Greater power for women is a valuable outcome per se and could also be a pathway for women to achieve more equality in other domains, such as access to health care.

Moreover, at least some of the gender gap in employment and earnings is due to norms that constrain women’s choices and achievements. By norms, I mean a society’s informal rules about appropriate or acceptable behavior. I use the terms ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ interchangeably here.

While gender norms restrict female employment in both developed and developing countries, I limit the scope of this article to developing countries, for the most part. I begin by discussing how gender norms mediate the relationship between economic development and female employment. I then lay out some specific social/cultural norms that impede women’s access to and success in the labor market, as well as case examples of policies aimed at circumventing or directly dismantling these barriers. Neither the set of norms nor the policies discussed are intended to be exhaustive. Rather than being a thorough review, this article’s goal is to make a case for the importance of gender norms in determining women’s labor market outcomes and the scope for policy to counter these restrictive norms.

¹These statistics are for labor force participation, but most studies I discuss assess employment. The distinction is that labor force participants also include those who are actively looking for employment but are not currently employed. I will use the terms interchangeably and usually mean employment.

I will mainly discuss policies and programs that have been evaluated with experimental or quasi-experimental methods.

2 Gender norms, economic development, and female employment

An influential view dating back fifty years is that the female labor force participation follows a U-shape with economic development (Sinha, 1965; Boserup, 1970; Durand, 1975). At low levels of economic development, women participate extensively in production, which is mostly home-based, for example on family farms. Several forces then cause female employment to decline as a society industrializes. One force is productivity growth and hence higher income. With more financial resources, the extra consumption a household can enjoy by having a second earner is less valuable due to diminishing returns. Also, insofar as there is stigma attached to women working, avoiding the stigma becomes more “affordable” to a household when it is richer; the material comfort it needs to sacrifice is lower. In addition, jobs move from the home to factories at this early stage of industrialization, and employment in “dirty” factories or alongside strangers might heighten the stigma of women working. The upward swing in female employment that completes the U-shape is due to increased education and the growth of the service sector as the structural transformation of the economy continues: Women have a comparative advantage in mentally intensive jobs compared to physically intensive jobs. In addition, jobs in offices and the service sector might be viewed as “cleaner,” with less stigma attached to them.

Goldin (1986) brought renewed attention to the U-shape hypothesis by showing its relevance for explaining the evolution of female employment in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Goldin (1995) and several subsequent scholars have also examined the pattern across countries and find general support for a U-shape. However, Gaddis and Klasen (2014) and Klasen (2019) argue that the relationship is more tenuous than much research suggests. Figure 1(a), adapted from Heath and Jayachandran (2017), shows that female employment across countries follows a U-shape, on average, but that this relationship still leaves much of the variation in the data unexplained. No doubt many

factors contribute to the differences among countries at the same stage of development, but one that is particularly relevant for this article is that gender norms differ across societies for reasons besides their stage of development, a point I return to at the end of this section.

Importantly, a U-shape pattern could hold even without introducing the idea that there is stigma attached to women working. While the theory needs some reason that men and women respond differently to structural changes in the economy, the reason could be women's comparative advantage in rearing at least very young children or men's comparative advantage in physically demanding work. For example, a stripped-down version of the theory is that female employment declines with development initially simply because the income effect and diminishing returns to consumption cause couples to shift from having two earners to one earner, with child-rearing being the reason that women are the ones who drop out of the labor force. Alternatively, the U-shape could be due to the larger challenge of balancing child care and work once jobs move away from the home. The rising part of the U could be due to more jobs becoming mentally intensive, without these jobs needing to be deemed "clean."

Despite stigma not being needed in a mathematical sense, in research on the U-shape, the concept of stigma is usually central. Scholars who have studied the phenomenon have viewed stigma as an important underlying force that helps explain the actual historical changes that have taken place, for example in female labor force participation in the US (Goldin, 1986). Indeed, when Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013) conducted interviews about gender norms in communities across 20 low- and middle-income countries, the consideration of whether a job was inappropriate for women often loomed large. In many cases, the frowned-upon jobs involved real or perceived danger from interacting with men. For example, the authors report that in interviews in south Sudan, respondents said that selling tea, coffee, or food in the market was stigmatized for women because of the interactions with people who might mistreat them (p. 130). While call centers are often cited as a source of "good" jobs in India that have brought young women into the labor force, Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013) report that some communities do not consider this a decent job for women. They quote one respondent as saying, "Women engaged in such jobs are not considered respectable because it has night shifts and the workplace is full of young men who have fat salaries." (p. 130).

The U-shape theory helps explain the evolution of female employment with economic development, but also leaves out many phenomena influencing female employment. Heath and Jayachandran (2017) show that over the past few decades, the U-shape curve has shifted upwards (Figure 1, panel b): Countries move along the curve as they develop over time, but, in addition, female employment is higher now than it was twenty or thirty years ago at the same level of economic development. This is partly because some developing countries are leap-frogging certain stages of industrialization, with services jobs occurring earlier in the development trajectory. In many developing countries, fertility is falling faster than one would predict based on income growth, which also likely contributes to rising female employment. In addition, concerted policy efforts may have played a role in boosting female employment. Many countries have implemented policies to increase girls' education, for example.

On the role of norms specifically, the U-shape theory introduces one way that stigma matters for female employment, but it by no means fully captures the role of stigma and norms. In the U-shape theory, underlying gender norms do not, or at least need not, vary across cultures. The norms simply have a different influence on female employment across stages of development.² But norms do vary considerably across societies, and for reasons unrelated to the current level of economic development.

Where does the variation across societies in views about female employment come from? Some of the cross-cultural differences in gender norms have deep historical roots. Boserup (1970) hypothesized that in societies in which men had a particularly strong absolute advantage in agriculture, a norm that work was the purview of men took hold. Specifically, she argued that the tools used to prepare land for cultivation in pre-industrial times affected the returns to male versus female labor, and, in turn, gender norms. Men, because of their upper body and grip strength, could operate ploughs much more productively than women. When agricultural tilling was instead done with hand tools such as hoes, men's advantage was smaller and women played a larger role in agriculture. Boserup's theory was

²Alternatively, one could couch the U-shape theory as saying the norms evolve with economic development, following the U-shape. This does not seem to fit the data. Jayachandran (2015) shows that stated attitudes about female employment are quite strongly negatively correlated with a country's income. The relationship is monotonic, not U-shaped.

that an economic rationale initially led to a gender division of roles in areas that relied on the plough, but then those gender roles became a social norm, one with a life of its own independent of its original rationale. Under this view, societies that historically relied on the plough continue to have large gender gaps in the labor market, because the norms about gender roles persisted even after the economic environment changed and agriculture was no longer a major sector.

Alesina et al. (2013) test Boserup's conjecture empirically and show that historical plough use in a region is indeed strongly correlated with current gender attitudes about women's employment and with women's employment outcomes. While this correlation is consistent with the theory, one reservation about drawing too strong of conclusions from it is that use of the plough could be the result of (historical) attitudes about gender, rather than the cause of (current) attitudes about gender. To address this concern, Alesina et al. (2013) also use an instrumental variables approach that predicts plough use with a region's geographic suitability for crops that lend themselves to plough cultivation. They find similar patterns when they take this extra step to isolate the causal effect of historical gender roles on present-day outcomes. Note that historical plough use does not differ dramatically between today's rich and poor countries, so this theory is not intended to explain rich-poor gaps in female employment.

Hansen et al. (2015) examine another way that historical experience seems to have shaped modern gender norms. They show that in societies that transitioned from hunting-gathering to agriculture earlier, women have a lower employment rate today.³ The conjectured reason is as follows. The adoption of agriculture led to an increase in fertility and a decrease in women's time spent in economic production. The longer that women have specialized in child-rearing, the more entrenched is the norm that economic production is the domain of men.⁴

³Becker (2019) proposes another way that historical economic activity may have shaped gender norms, but with implications for restrictions on women's sexuality rather than employment. She shows that societies that were pastoralist restrict women's sexual freedom today. The proposed explanation is that men's long absences from home increased uncertainty about paternity, which led to practices to constrain women's sexual activity such as female genital mutilation.

⁴One reason the transition to agriculture may have increased fertility is that it increased income, and there was a positive income effect on fertility. See Hansen et al. (2015) for a discussion of other reasons.

The work of Boserup (1970) and Alesina et al. (2013) show that societal norms about women’s work can sometimes have economic origins that persist long after the economic rationale for them is obsolete. In other cases, the historical roots of norms are religious rather than economic. Today, some of the lowest female employment rates are observed in the Middle East, North Africa, and India. These societies place a high value on a woman’s “purity,” or limited interaction with men outside her family. Under the Hindu caste system, men outside the family are a source of “pollution” for women. Disallowing women from working outside the home is one way of preserving their purity (Chen, 1995). Because these restrictions apply more stringently to upper-caste women in India, lower-caste women often have more professional flexibility and autonomy (Field et al., 2010). Islam similarly endorses the practice of *purdah*, or female seclusion, which contributes to the low female employment rate in much of the Middle East and North Africa.⁵

3 Overcoming cultural barriers to women’s work

This section presents examples of policy approaches that have been used (not always successfully) to overcome a series of cultural barriers to women’s participation and success in the labor market. I discuss social norms around (1) harassment and violence toward women in public spaces; (2) restrictions placed on women’s social interactions and freedom of movement; (3) control over household finances; (4) intimate partner violence and who should be the family breadwinner; and (5) who bears responsibility for household chores and child care. Most of the policy solutions I discuss try to work around and lessen the impact of the norms. Then in the last subsection (6), I discuss solutions that aim to directly overturn the norms.

3.1 Ensuring women’s safety at work and while commuting

One norm that differs across societies is how tolerated sexual harassment in public spaces is. Concerns about sexual harassment and abuse while commuting or at work are a barrier to women’s employment in countries that lack a strong norm condemning such

⁵Koomson (2017) discusses how a similar proscription against married women working with men within the Talensi culture in Ghana limits women’s access to jobs in mining, because mining pits are considered secluded. In contrast, fields are in plain view, so gender mixing within agriculture is common and accepted.

behavior.

One tricky but important aspect of this concern for women’s safety is that it is often partly real and partly the expression of a patriarchal norm. That is, women do face personal risk of sexual harassment and abuse. At the same time, sometimes “ensuring safety” includes restricting interactions with men that a woman herself might find no danger or discomfort from, but that men in her family or community do not condone. I focus first on safety as women themselves would perceive it. I then pivot to seclusion of women as a patriarchal norm at the end of this subsection.

One country where concern about women’s safety is acute is India. In a survey conducted in New Delhi, 95% of women aged 16 to 49 stated that they felt unsafe in public spaces (UN Women and ICRW, 2013). Chakraborty et al. (2018) correlate neighborhood-level perceptions of crime and female employment using 2005 India Human Development Survey data and find that a higher perceived level of crime against women is associated with lower female labor force participation. Siddique (2018) also finds a negative link between perceived violence and female employment in India, using media reports of violence as the measure of perceived violence and the National Sample Survey as the data source on female employment.

Borker (2018) demonstrates another economic consequence of the physical and verbal abuse and harassment women face: compromising on one’s choice of college. She studies which campus students apply to within the Delhi University system. Over two thirds of students live with their parents and commute to campus, usually by public transport. She surveyed students about where they lived and what campus they chose, and combined this information with a risk score for each possible commute to a campus, using transportation maps and crowd-sourced data on safety at different locations and on different modes of transport. She uses these data to infer the willingness to sacrifice school quality for safety: female students will choose a lower-quality college within the Delhi University system for safety, whereas male students put little weight on this concern. With some additional assumptions, she estimates that women’s concerns for safety translate into 20% lower expected post-college earnings. Another way to see that this is a large effect is that the amount of money that women, relative to men, are willing to spend annually to have a commute that

is one standard deviation safer is over twice the annual university fees.

One policy solution is women-only subway cars and buses. Through its *Viajemos Seguras* (Women Traveling Safely) program, Mexico City reserves the first three cars of the subway for women before 10 o'clock in the morning and after 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Aguilar et al. (forthcoming) surveyed over 3000 women in Mexico City to measure self-reported harassment of women riding the subway. By making comparisons around when the women-only-cars hours start and end each day, they find that the program reduces harassment. Similarly Kondylis et al. (2020) finds that a women-only space on the subway in Rio de Janeiro led to a reduction in both verbal and physical harassment experienced by female riders and that many women are willing to pay a substantial premium to be in the women-only space. (In Rio, about 10% of cars are reserved for women during the morning and evening commute hours.) Both of these studies find negative unintended consequences, however. In the Mexico City case, some of the violence is displaced; male-on-male shoving and violence is higher during the hours of women-only cars. In Rio, the researchers find that there is some stigmatization of women who ride women-only cars.

Martinez et al. (2018) find that expanding the bus rapid transit and elevated rail system in Lima, Peru, increased female labor supply. This transport did not have a women-only component, but even general improvements in public transportation can help female labor supply. Seki and Yamada (2020) study the rollout of the Delhi metro system and find a similar result that proximity to a new metro station increased female but not male employment. The authors of both studies speculate that safety was one reason for the effect. Of course, it is also possible that access to public transportation has a larger effect on women than men for other reasons such as men being fully attached to the labor force, women being more likely to work part time (so commute time is a larger share of the time cost of working), or households choosing to live nearby the man's place of employment.

As mentioned above, sometimes a patriarchal urge to restrict women's freedom is cast as concern about safety. Dean and Jayachandran (2019) study a setting where family members' concern about women interacting with men outside the family and misperceptions of safety risk seem to stand in the way of women's work. They collaborated with an organization that runs private kindergartens in rural Karnataka, India. Teaching young children in the village

is considered a suitable job for young women, even among those generally unfavorable to female employment, but social norms nonetheless present a challenge for teachers' success. First, one role of the teachers is to market the school to families and enroll new students. This entails visiting homes to talk to parents. This interaction with others is sometimes worrisome to teachers' family members. Second, because there is not enough scale within a village to offer in-person training, the ongoing trainings that refresh teachers' skills bring together teachers from several villages and occur in one of the towns. However, families are often hesitant to allow teachers to spend the night outside of the village, so these trainings are usually restricted to a single day. Moreover, sometimes family members are concerned that the teacher's manager is male; while kindergarten teachers are almost exclusively female, managers cover multiple schools so must travel across many villages within their territory; the job requirement to travel means that it is typically only men who accept this job.

This setting highlights that it is often in employers' interests to shift norms that stand in the way of women's employment. Firms value having a larger pool of applicants, a higher retention rate among its employees, and fewer restrictions on the activities that their employees are willing to do.

Thus, Dean and Jayachandran (2019) evaluated a set of interventions aimed at dispelling family members' undue concerns. The general approach was to familiarize family members with the woman's job, under the hypothesis that some of the concern was due to imagining worst-case scenarios, such as a debauchery at training sessions. The first intervention entailed creating a "family-orientation" video and showing it to family members. The video addressed common concerns around safety. It featured footage filmed at trainings to show what they are really like – a room full of women doing group exercises or listening to an instructor. The videos also featured testimonials from experienced teachers and their family members (husbands, fathers, mothers, in-laws) aimed at dispelling some myths.⁶ The second intervention led guided conversations between the teacher and her family members about the pros and cons of her working. This strategy was inspired by the current practices of the kindergarten provider's human resources staff. When they hear from a teacher that

⁶A second video shown to families highlighted the non-monetary benefits of employment such as personal growth and self-confidence for the woman.

her family has concerns about her work (for example about travel for training), they send a staff member to help mediate between the teacher and the family. The hypothesis was that helping the family have these conversations preemptively could prevent concerns from reaching a boiling point.

Unfortunately, these interventions had no impact on either how supportive family members were of the woman working or whether she stayed on the job. It is possible that the interventions were too light-touch or were deemed “cheap talk.” These null results do not mean that acclimating family members or using employer-driven approaches to shift norms holds no promise. It is worth noting that a limitation of a single firm investing in shifting norms is that some of the benefits are enjoyed by other firms; a woman might become so empowered that she can move up the career ladder and quit her current job to accept a more senior position elsewhere. This suggests scope for industry-wide efforts. For example, in the United States, there are organizations aimed at bringing more women into STEM fields that are funded by multiple firms. It is possible that a similar model could be effective in shifting norms about female employment in areas where the rate is low.

3.2 Catalyzing interaction and coordination among working women

As discussed above, the desire to seclude women from interactions with men in order to preserve their “purity” stifles women’s participation in the labor market. In this subsection, I focus on a specific way that the norm hinders women’s work: It restricts the useful interactions women have with business peers and, more generally, means that working women enjoy fewer benefits from “strength in numbers.”

One form of employment where restrictions on women’s interactions affects their success is entrepreneurship. The majority of microentrepreneurs in developing countries are women, but female-owned businesses tend to underperform their male-owned counterparts. The prevalence of female-owned businesses and the gender gaps in performance help explain why many civil-society interventions aimed at helping microenterprises focus on women. One popular type of intervention is business training. The rationale is that women have more limited access to education and to ways to learn business skills informally. However, the evidence on the benefits of business training is mixed, with many studies finding no

appreciable impact on profits.

Business know-how is one constraint women face, but it is not the only one, and it might not be the binding constraint preventing success. Field et al. (2010) and Field et al. (2016) study another disadvantage female entrepreneurs have: Because of norms limiting their mobility, women have sparse networks of peer entrepreneurs. Peers can be valuable for gaining informal skills as well as information about the market or customers. They might be potential business partners or a support network. Especially in societies that practice female seclusion or curtailed mobility, women have fewer interactions with other entrepreneurs from which they can learn and benefit.

Field et al. (2010) and Field et al. (2016) compared a standard business training program offered to women to a variant in which the participant could name a female friend or family member to be invited to the training too. The hypotheses were that being invited alongside a friend might increase take-up, lead to more engagement during training, and enable reinforcement of the learnings after the training was over.

The two-day business training was offered to self-employed women affiliated with the Self-Employed Women’s Association Bank in Ahmedabad, India. Participants mostly ran small home-based businesses (e.g., embroidery, rolling cigarettes), while some sold products in the market, such as vegetables. The main findings were that women invited to training with a friend reported having higher volume of business and higher household income four months after the program ended, compared to the control group. They were also less likely to report their occupation as housewife, suggestive that being a microentrepreneur became a stronger part of their identity. Those invited to training without a friend saw no such gains. In terms of the mechanisms, being invited with a friend did not increase attendance or knowledge. While the study was not designed to unpack the exact mechanism, there is suggestive evidence that attending with a friend led women to set – and achieve – more ambitious goals. Thus, aspirations may be a key intermediate outcome that would improve if women were granted more freedom of movement and association.

Another finding in Field et al. (2010) — which speaks to the important effects of the norm of female seclusion — is that the improvement of business outcomes was especially large for women who belong to castes or religious groups that impose more restrictions on

whether women can move about the community and interact with others unaccompanied. How seclusion of women contributes to the gender gap in employment success is an area where further research would be valuable.

In a similar vein to Field et al., Lafortune et al. (2018) tested the impacts of two separate add-ons to business training in Chile — either a one-hour visit by an alumna of the program who became successful in her business or individually-tailored consulting on how to improve the business — and found that the visit by a role model increased participants’ business profits. The mechanism of being energized by a role model highlights a general point that applies to many of the examples I present: While an intervention’s design might have been inspired by a restrictive gender norm, the impacts it has might materialize for reasons independent of or tangential to the norm. For example, exposure to a role model could be especially valuable for female entrepreneurs because their seclusion means they organically have less exposure to role models. But the intervention could be more valuable for women for reasons unrelated to their limited interaction with other female entrepreneurs. Alternatively, exposure to a role model might be equally valuable for men and women, a hypothesis that a study of female entrepreneurs is unable to test.

Miller et al. (2020) discuss a different way in which having a critical mass of women in the workforce could be important. They point out that if employees or customers prefer a gender-segregated workplace, firms might then choose to hire only men or only women. They find evidence of exceptional gender-segregation across employers in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia but not in other regions, consistent with these regions norms about gender segregation and low female labor force participation. Moreover, they point out that if a firm employing only male workers must pay a fixed cost to gender-integrate, it will only choose to do so if it expects enough women to be interested in the job. This represents a coordination problem, or negative feedback loop, through which low aggregate female labor force participation can, in turn, cause low demand by firms for female employees. Their study is written with Saudi Arabia in mind, where this coordination problem might hinder efforts to bring more women into the labor force. In this sort of setting, a “big push” campaign to bring more women into the labor force could be a useful policy strategy.

3.3 Giving women more control over money

An influential study by de Mel et al. (2008) evaluated the returns to giving cash grants to microentrepreneurs in Sri Lanka and found a striking gender gap in returns to capital: Grants given to men but not women raised profits considerably. In a follow-up study, the authors argue that women’s grants were “captured” by other household members (de Mel et al., 2009). This is consistent with a norm that men should serve as the main financial decision-makers in the family and, thus, women’s money should be channeled to her husband to control.

Male family members laying claim to women’s grants is an example of a broader phenomenon of there being no clear division between business and family for small business owners. This challenge might be especially large for women because they typically have low bargaining power in the family. Friedson-Ridenour and Pierotti (2019) find that pressure from husbands (and others) leads female entrepreneurs in urban Ghana to invest less in their businesses and allocate more for household needs. Further evidence comes from Dupas and Robinson (2013), who offer zero-interest bank accounts to microentrepreneurs in Kenya and find that for women but not men, bank accounts increase savings and investment (as well as personal expenditures). Keeping their money in a bank account rather than as cash on hand might enable women to resist pressure to share the money with others and, thus, to allocate it to their business or their own consumption.

Faced with this pressure, some women hide money from their husbands to retain control over it. Fiala (2018) finds heterogeneous impacts of giving grants or loans to women based on whether they hide money from their spouse, a tendency that was measured using a lab-in-the-field experiment. Only women who hide money from their husbands experience improved economic outcomes from the capital infusions. In contrast, grants and loans to men are more effective among those who do not hide money from their wives.

Bernhardt et al. (2019) systematically examine whether the finding that women have a lower return to capital than men can be explained by these intrahousehold dynamics. They re-analyze data from previous studies in Ghana, India, and Sri Lanka that gave grants or loans to both female and male business owners. They find that returns to capital are lower

for women if their household includes another entrepreneur, while male entrepreneurs do not see their returns dampened by the presence of another microenterprise in the household. The likely interpretation is that grants given to women were being redirected and used by their family members' business. Thus, the returns to capital were not lower in women-run businesses; rather, the amount of the capital actually invested in their business was just lower. Consistent with this interpretation, aggregate profits for the household do not differ depending on the gender of the grant recipient. As further evidence, if the grant recipient is in a single-enterprise household, then there is no gender gap in how much the grant improves the enterprise's performance.

These findings point to a challenge for women running businesses, which is that they do not have full control over cash they receive. One potential solution is to provide capital in-kind, rather than as cash. For example, de Mel et al. (2008) and Fafchamps et al. (2014) find that in-kind grants have high returns for female entrepreneurs. However, in-kind grants are not always possible, since each business's needs are different.

Another solution is to make women's money less visible and accessible to family members. Riley (2020) conducted a field experiment among female entrepreneurs in Uganda in which loans were disbursed either as cash or as a mobile-money deposit. She finds that receiving the loan via mobile money led to higher business profits eight months later, compared to receiving the loan as cash. The largest effects are among those who felt most pressured to share money with their family members, as measured at baseline.

An analogous challenge faces women who are wage earners rather than self-employed. Their personal benefit from working will be lower if their family lays claim to their earnings. Indeed, men's control over women's earnings is a consistent pattern found by Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013) in their qualitative work on gender norms in twenty countries. They write, "[There] is overwhelming evidence, reported by both women and by men in a number of communities (showing no specific regional or country pattern), of how little autonomy women actually exercise when it comes to their own assets and income." (p. 93).

With this hypothesis in mind, Field et al. (2020) tested whether setting up bank accounts for women would have benefits for female employment. They worked with the government of Madhya Pradesh, a state in India, to implement a system of setting up bank

accounts for women and depositing their wages in their personal bank accounts. This policy change was tested in the context of India’s workfare program, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which offers rural households casual work on public works programs. Under the status quo, women’s wages are deposited in the male household head’s bank account. The researchers find that depositing the earnings in the woman’s personal bank account increased the amount that women participated in NREGS. Even though their wage did not change, presumably their control over their earnings did. The observed effect is concentrated among women with low participation in the labor force at the outset and whose husbands were more disapproving of women’s employment.

3.4 Reducing backlash and violence at home

Two other important norms, which interact in affecting female employment, relate to whose role it is to be the primary breadwinner in the family and whether men have the right to be violent toward their wives.

Increasing women’s participation and earnings in the labor market could either decrease or increase their exposure to intimate-partner violence (IPV). Most models of household bargaining would predict that greater earnings power should reduce IPV because women have a more credible threat to leave an abusive relationship. Consistent with this channel, Aizer (2010) finds that better earning prospects for women reduces IPV in California. Her analysis uses variation in the gender wage gap that comes about from industry-specific changes in wages combined with different propensities by gender to be employed in a given industry. Anderberg et al. (2015) find evidence of a similar protective effect of working in the UK.

However, it is also possible that men feel threatened by their female partners’ greater economic power. This “backlash” channel means that female employment could increase IPV. Krishnan et al. (2010) use panel data in Bangalore, India and find that, for women, becoming employed is associated with experiencing more IPV, and ceasing employment reduces IPV. The patterns related to men’s employment are also consistent with a backlash effect: A husband engages in more IPV when he becomes unemployed, while IPV decreases when he finds employment. Guarnieri and Rainer (2018) present evidence consistent with

backlash in their analysis of Cameroon; women in the former British territories of Cameroon are more likely to be victims of IPV and are also more likely to be engaged in paid employment compared to those in former French territories.

Violence is an extreme outcome that can result from men feeling threatened by their wives being breadwinners, but there may be less extreme consequences, like unhappiness in the union. Bertrand et al. (2015), analyzing US data, find that the divorce rate is higher among women whose earnings potential is higher than their partner's. While this could reflect women having the ability to walk away from unhappy relationships, it might arise because the woman being the larger breadwinner destabilizes the relationship.

If women anticipate IPV or destabilization of their relationship, this could dampen their employment. Strikingly, Bertrand et al. (2015) show that in US administrative data, the distribution of women's share of a couple's income has a sharp drop above 50%; couples apparently avoid the woman earning more than the man, or such unions dissolve at a high rate.⁷

Thus, another type of intervention that could improve women's employment prospects is to reduce society's tolerance and practice of IPV. If IPV is viewed as unacceptable and its prevalence drops considerably, then concern about IPV will become less of a deterrent to women working. More generally, policies that shift views about masculinity such that men do not feel diminished by their partners' earning power could help boost female employment. While, to my knowledge, no study has examined the causal effect of reductions in IPV risk on female employment, there are several potential ways to reduce violence, such as strengthening and enforcing laws around domestic violence, conducting media campaigns to change norms, and using behavior change communication. Some approaches, such as certain behavior change communication programs, have shown strong impacts on violence (Ellsberg et al., 2015; Jewkes et al., 2008; Bott et al., 2005). A conjecture – one that could be tested by researchers – is that these successful programs have a downstream effect on female employment. Note that a downstream effect could materialize not only because fear of IPV deters women from working but also because the experience of IPV – the physical

⁷The study also finds that, in couples where the woman's earning potential is higher than the man's, perversely, the gender gap in time spent on home production is larger. This finding echoes the findings of Bittman et al. (2003).

and psychological injuries – make women less able to work productively.

3.5 Making it easier to balance work and family

One entrenched gender norm, which is not necessarily stronger in poor countries than rich ones, is that women should do the bulk of housework and child care Bittman et al. (2003); Sayer (2005). This norm means that women have fewer hours to work, greater need for flexible hours, and less ability to travel for work, compared to their male counterparts, all of which could limit career opportunities and employment success. As a stark example of women balancing work and family, Delecourt and Fitzpatrick (2019) found that among owner-managers of small drug stores in Uganda, 38% of women and 0% of men had their small children with them at work at the time of unannounced visits by the research team. Those who had brought their children to work earned lower profits, on average, which is suggestive of the career costs of juggling multiple responsibilities.

One way to free up women to participate more fully in the work force would be to shift the norm about who is responsible for household work, but other types of policies could help as well. For example, interventions that make household chores less time-consuming disproportionately free up women’s time. Dinkelman (2011) uses a post-apartheid push to expand access to electricity in South Africa to study the effects on the labor market. She finds that it increases female employment, with supporting evidence pointing to reduced time spent on home production as a mechanism, for example because of a shift from wood to electric stoves. Bharati et al. (2020) evaluates the Indonesian government’s Conversion to Liquefied Petroleum Gas program and finds that the switch to a labor-saving cooking fuel increased female employment. In the US context, owning more household appliances is associated with a higher female employment rate (Coen-Pirani et al., 2010).

Policies that provide viable alternatives to mothers’ care of children also could increase female employment.⁸ Talamas (2020) provides compelling evidence on the effect of child care availability on female employment in Mexico. In Mexico, like many low- and middle-income countries, extended family members, specifically grandmothers, often provide child

⁸I do not review the literature on family planning programs in this article, but that type of policy, by increasing couples’ ability to choose the number and timing of births, also can expand women’s employment opportunities.

care. Talamas (2020) uses quarterly panel labor force survey data for a sample of mothers of young children who co-reside with the children's grandmother. He shows that if the grandmother dies, the likelihood that the mother is employed falls sharply, both in absolute terms and relative to fathers. The drop in employment is smaller when market child care services are less expensive and is not seen if a co-residing grandfather dies, providing support for child care being the main mechanism.

Barros et al. (2011) analyze a lottery for free child care for low-income families in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and find that winning a child care slot increases the likelihood that a mother is employed from 36% to 46%. Martínez and Perticará (2017) find that free after-school care for primary-school age children increased women's employment in Chile by 3.4 percentage points, or 5 percent. While this effect might seem small, the small magnitude is because the free program mostly crowded out other (non-free) formal child care; the program only increased use of formal child care by 4.2 percentage points. The results, thus, suggest that increased access to formal child care has a quite large effect on mothers' employment. The program also increased take-up of already-existing free child care for younger children; once the older children's care became free, women found it worthwhile to use the available child care services for their younger children and enter the labor market. Likewise, Hojman and Lopez Boo (2019) finds that access to subsidized day care in Nicaragua increases mothers' likelihood of working by 14 percentage points, or about one third. Clark et al. (2019) offer vouchers for subsidized daycare in an informal settlement in Nairobi and find that mothers' employment increased, concentrated among married women. Among single women, the subsidized day care affected job choice: Women switched to jobs with more regular hours, earning as much money while working fewer hours. Using a difference-in-differences design, Halim et al. (2019) find that employment of women with preschool-age children increases in Indonesia with the expansion of public preschools. Preschools operate only three to four hours per day, likely explaining why the increase female labor supply was concentrated in unpaid work in the family business.

3.6 Shifting the underlying gender norms

Many of the solutions I have discussed work around the social norms, for example by giving women bank accounts so they have more control over their earnings in contexts where the norm is that men control household accounts. It is quite possible that the increases in female employment and agency brought about through such policies will, in turn, erode restrictive gender norms. For example, an exogenous increase in the share of women working could reduce the stigma of female employment just by making it more commonplace.

Another tack is to pursue policies aimed directly at changing attitudes and norms. The study by Dean and Jayachandran (2019) discussed above is an example of trying to shift attitudes about female employment among family members. Another example is McKelway (2019), which studied women’s employment in Uttar Pradesh, India, a setting in which families often object to female employment. This study found that showing family members a promotional video about job opportunities for women in carpet weaving led to a large increase in the women’s employment, suggesting that it successfully reduced families’ opposition.

Several other studies analyze attempts to change norms about women’s work. Bursztyn et al. (2018) show compelling evidence of the importance of norms in Saudi Arabia. They elicit men’s beliefs about women’s work, and their “second-order beliefs,” meaning their beliefs about others’ beliefs. They find that men systematically overestimate peers’ disapproval of women’s work. When the researchers provide accurate information to men about their peers’ views, men’s wives are more likely to begin seeking employment. Similarly, Aloud et al. (2020) document and correct pluralistic ignorance (the term psychologists use to describe when people are mistaken about the prevailing attitude in their community) in Saudi Arabia. They find that female university students underestimate their peers’ aspirations to work, and providing them accurate information about peers’ views raises their own intentions to work. The problem solved in these two related studies is low-hanging fruit: People perceive women’s work to be more stigmatized by the community than is actually the case. While this overestimation of stigma might not generally be true, when it is, correcting misperceptions is an inexpensive and, it appears, useful intervention. But the more

general lesson from the studies is that, at least in some societies, the community’s approval or disapproval of female employment matters a lot for whether women work.

Dhar et al. (2020) evaluate an effort to reshape gender attitudes, using schools as a medium to reach adolescents. Adolescents are young enough to have malleable attitudes but old enough to think about complex moral issues. Since attitudes are more stable post-adolescence, the effects of an attitude change program could potentially persist and affect participants’ behaviors throughout their lifetimes. A girl who starts to believe more strongly in gender equality might hold firm in her goal of going to college. A boy who discards his attachment to traditional gender roles might grow up to be a husband who is supportive of his wife’s career and helps out with child care and housework, and a father who treats his daughters and sons equally.

The project arose out of the Government of Haryana’s interest in addressing the pervasive gender inequality in its society. The research team proposed using government schools — one of the powerful ways a government has to influence values in its society — to change attitudes about women’s and girls’ roles and rights in society. This led to a collaboration with the human rights non-profit Breakthrough. Breakthrough uses media campaigns and other approaches to shift norms about gender-based violence, early marriage, and other gender-related problems in India. Breakthrough designed a program called *Taaron ki Toli* (“League of Stars”) centered around classroom discussions held during the regular school day. The government granted Breakthrough permission to have its staff come to the schools once every two to three weeks and conduct 45-minute long sessions. The curriculum, spread across 27 interactive classroom sessions, covered gender roles, recognition and (in)tolerance of gender discrimination, and interpersonal skills such as communication and social interaction between the genders.⁹ Through these discussions, and auxiliary activities such as homework assignments to record observations about how males and females are treated in their community and periodic school-wide events like street plays, students explored gender identity and stereotypes, came to better understand gender inequities and their consequences, and were encouraged to communicate and act on what they had learned.

⁹One norm the program aimed to shift was around the responsibility for household chores, aiming to convince boys that they should also contribute. Arguably, this norm around household work, including child care, is one of the most relevant for women’s participation in the labor market across all societies worldwide.

Dhar et al. (2020) designed a randomized controlled trial through which the program was rolled out in 150 randomly selected government schools from a sample of 314 schools. In its initial phase, the study assessed short-run impacts on three primary outcomes: gender attitudes, measured as an index of responses to direct questions and vignettes on gender roles, opportunities for education, employment outside the home, and fertility behavior; girls' aspiration related to education and career; and gender-related behaviors, measured as an index of responses to questions about students' interactions with the opposite gender, engagement in traditionally gendered activities, and girls' autonomy, for example.

The study finds that the program led to a large shift toward more gender-equitable attitudes. The effect size on the attitudes index is 0.2 standard deviations, which corresponds to the program successfully changing gender-biased views to become supportive of gender equality 16% of the time. Girls started out with more support for gender equality, but both genders experienced comparable increases in support. The program did not affect girls' educational and career aspirations, which were high and comparable to boys' aspirations to begin with.

Program participants also reported more gender-equitable behavior such as increased interaction with the opposite sex, sharing household work, and mobility for girls. The effect on behavior was considerably larger among boys, despite the attitude change being comparable for both genders. A likely explanation is that boys have fewer constraints on their behavior. This highlights that although believing in gender equality is necessary for behaving in ways that reflect gender-equal views, it is not sufficient; one also needs agency. The gender gap in power in society means that attitude change to promote gender equality could be more effective when aimed at men. However, another consideration for targeting is that adults' attitudes not only guide their own behavior, they also influence their children's attitudes. Dhar et al. (2019) examine the link between parents' gender attitudes and their children's attitudes and find that mothers seem to exert more influence on both their sons and their daughters, perhaps because they spend considerably more time with their children than fathers do. For this reason, making women more supportive of gender equality is also important.

4 Concluding remarks

This article summarized various ways that gender norms act as a barrier to women's full and equal participation in the labor market in developing countries. Implementing policies and programs that are designed to work around these norms is one way to help female employment. For example, if social mores limit women's ability to interact with men, then programs that enable home-based work or enable women to more easily network with other women could be useful. By creating more equality in the labor market, this approach might, in turn, erode the restrictive norms, creating a virtuous cycle.

Another promising approach is to try to directly change individuals' and community's beliefs and attitudes that privilege men in the workplace. While this type of attitude change intervention is often used by non-governmental organizations, there is an important opportunity for governments in developing countries to expand their use of this strategy. Many governments want to promote gender equality, whether as an end in itself or as a way to increase economic prosperity by putting women's talents to better use. Media campaigns and school-based programs like the one studied by Dhar et al. (2020) could be a valuable complement to more standard governmental strategies such as using the legal system to promote equality. Governments are in a powerful position to inculcate their constituents with a commitment to equality of opportunities, both in the labor market and overall.

Shifting cultural norms will not be easy, however. One of the most challenging norms to change will be about roles and responsibilities in the home. Certain restrictive gender norms are particular to a few societies, such as limiting women's freedom of movement. For many other norms, there are examples of great strides in a relatively short amount of time; acceptability of intimate-partner violence has fallen considerably in some societies over a relatively short period. In contrast, the norm that women are primarily responsible for housework and child care is pervasive in essentially all societies. The dividend for women's equality if this norm can be reshaped would be tremendous.

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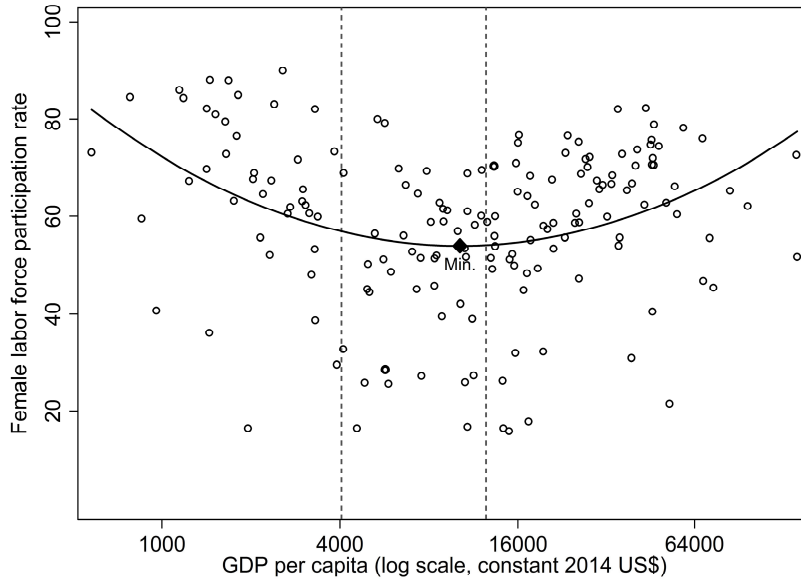
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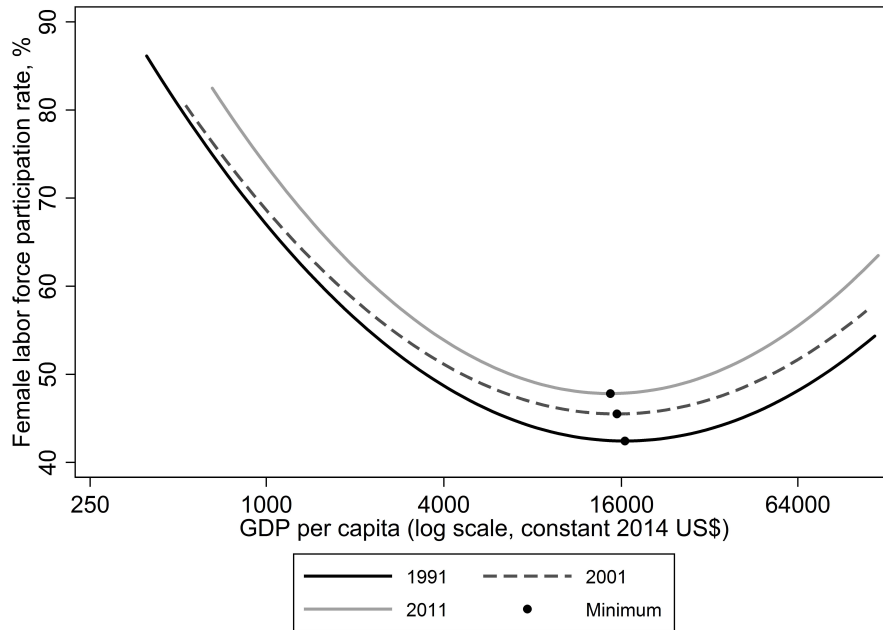
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Figure 1: U-shape relationship between female employment and GDP per capita



(a) Best-fit quadratic is U-shaped, but much variation is unexplained



(b) Best-fit U-shape has shifted upward in recent decades

Notes: GDP per capita is the PPP-adjusted value. Female labor force participation is from the World Development Indicators data.