



# 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. I begin by discussing the relationship between economic development and female employment and argue that cultural norms help explain the large differences in female employment among countries at the same level of development. I then examine several gender-related social norms that constrain women's employment and present examples of policies aimed at overcoming these barriers. Some of the policies are designed to work around a norm, helping women to be more successful in the labor market despite it, while others attempt to change the norms. There is evidence that both approaches can be effective in increasing women's labor market participation and earnings. Policy-making that is attuned to cultural norms is a promising avenue for narrowing gender gaps in the labor market.

**JEL Classification** O12 · J16 · J22 · Z10

## 1 Introduction

Globally about one out of every two adult women participates in the labor force, compared to three out of every four men (International Labour Organization 2020).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, women who do participate in the labor market tend to earn less than their male counterparts. While a large body of research has explored the determinants of female employment outcomes in developing countries, much of this work focuses on

<sup>1</sup> The statistics are for labor force participation, 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. Note that the International Labour Organization's definition of labor force participation includes work based at home for payment in cash or in kind, including on a farm.

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economic considerations. In this article, I discuss an emerging literature on the role of cultural barriers to women's participation and success in the labor market, with a focus on developing countries.<sup>2</sup>

While engaging in market labor does not imply greater well-being—a person might prefer not to be employed—women's market labor is of policy interest because paid employment often confers more autonomy and influence than unpaid household labor does (Sen 1990; Kessler-Harris 2003; Kabeer 2008). As a result, and despite the fact that women contribute more than men to domestic chores and child care, which also create economic value, women tend to have less power than men in their families and in society (Beneria 1981). Greater power for women is valuable per se and could also be a pathway for women to achieve more equality in other domains, such as access to health care.

In addition, if women face extra barriers to market labor, then their time and talents are being misallocated. Leveling the playing field in the labor market could, thus, lead to substantial gains in GDP for developing countries (Ostry et al. 2018; Hsieh et al. 2019).

Indeed, at least some of the gender gap in employment and earnings is due to extra barriers that women face, such as cultural norms that constrain their choices. By norms, I mean a society's informal rules about appropriate or acceptable behavior. I use the terms 'social' and 'cultural' interchangeably here.

In this article, I begin by discussing the relationship between economic development and female employment and the importance of looking beyond a country's level of development to understand its gender gaps in employment and earnings. I argue that gender norms help explain the large differences in female employment among societies at similar levels of economic development. 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. The review emphasizes, where possible, evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental studies.

## 2 Economic Development, Gender Norms, and Female Employment

An influential view dating back 50 years is that female labor force participation follows a U-shape over the course of economic development, declining and then rising (Sinha 1965; Boserup 1970; Durand 1975). At low levels of economic development,

<sup>2</sup> Gender norms restrict female employment in both developed and developing countries. A thorough discussion of developed countries is beyond the scope I have delineated for this article, though I do discuss some foundational papers about developed countries, particularly on topics where there is limited evidence from developing countries.



women participate extensively in production, which is mostly home-based, for example on family farms. Female employment then declines as a society industrializes. One reason is that productivity growth leads to higher income, and the extra consumption a household can enjoy by having a second earner is less valuable due to diminishing returns. If women have a comparative advantage in rearing at least young children or there is stigma attached to women working, women will be more likely to leave the labor force than their husbands. Another reason for the decline in female employment is that jobs move from the home to factories at this early stage of industrialization. Balancing employment with household responsibilities, which fall disproportionately on women, becomes more challenging. 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 the newly abundant mentally intensive jobs. In addition, jobs in the service sector might be viewed as more “suitable” for women than those in manufacturing or heavy industry. Two other reasons for the development-driven rise in female employment are that fertility rates decline and household chores become less labor-intensive (Jayachandran 2015).

Embedded in this theory is that there are gender differences in comparative advantage (Becker 1981) or gendered norms that play out differently over the course of economic development. Note that in this view, gender norms do not vary across cultures. Rather, stigma about women working has a different influence on female employment across stages of development.<sup>3</sup>

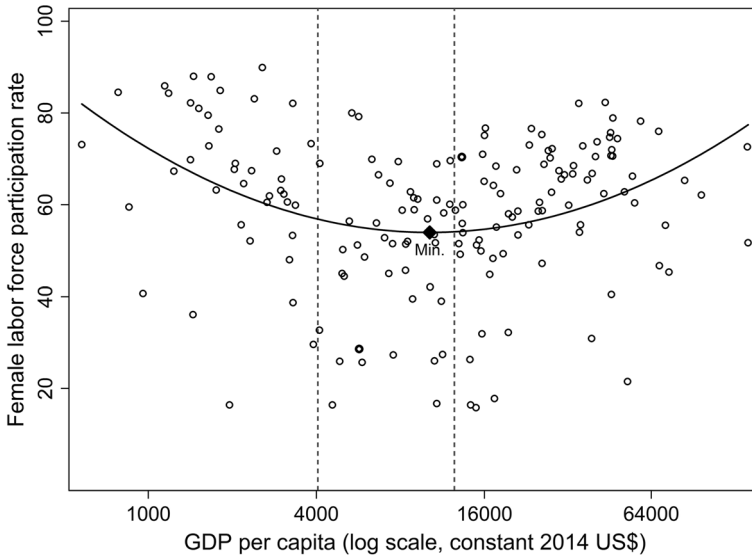
Goldin (1995) and several subsequent scholars have examined the pattern across countries generally find support for a U-shape. However, Gaddis and Klasen (2014) and Klasen (2019) argue that the relationship is more tenuous than much research suggests.

Both of these views are correct in the sense that female employment across countries does follow a U-shape, on average, but that this relationship still leaves much of the variation in the data unexplained. Figure 1, adapted from Heath and Jayachandran (2017), shows the data across countries and the best-fit quadratic curve. No doubt many factors contribute to the vast differences in female employment among countries at the same stage of development. This article focuses on one of them: gender norms. It lays out the case that society-specific cultural norms are an important source of the differences in female employment rates that we observe around the world.

Gender norms are a plausible driver of the cross-country variation in female employment because they differ across societies for reasons unrelated to the current level of economic development. In addition, they influence female employment. For example, Fernandez and Fogli (2009), building on work by Antecol (2000, 2001), show that whether a female second-generation immigrant in the USA works

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, 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.





**Fig. 1** Best-fit quadratic is U-shaped, but much variation is unexplained. *Notes* GDP per capita is the PPP-adjusted value. Female labor force participation is from the World Development Indicators data

is strongly influenced by the female employment and fertility norms in her ancestral homeland.

Where does the variation across societies in views about female employment come from? Some of the cross-cultural differences 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 that 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 plows 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 that an economic rationale initially led to a gender division of roles in areas that relied on the plow, 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 plow 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 plow 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 plow 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 plow use with a region's geographic suitability for crops that lend themselves to plow 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 plow 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

The work of Boserup (1970) and Alesina et al. (2013) shows that, while social norms around women's work sometimes have economic origins, these norms can persist for a long period after the economic factors are no longer relevant. 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). Much Islamic doctrine similarly endorses the practice of *purdah*, or female seclusion, which contributes to the low female employment rate in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>6</sup>

### 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

<sup>4</sup> Becker (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.

<sup>5</sup> One 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.

<sup>6</sup> Koomson (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.



violence toward women in public spaces; (2) restrictions placed on women's social interactions and freedom of movement; (3) control over household finances; (4) men as 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 these 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

Concern about sexual harassment and abuse while commuting or at work is a barrier to women's employment in contexts where such harassment is widespread. The differences across societies in how common public harassment is seem partly due to differences in the social acceptability of such behavior.

Data about norms around public harassment are scarce, but a few public opinion polls are suggestive that norms might vary widely. A survey conducted in Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine found that over 60% of both men and women in each site believed that women who dress provocatively deserve to be harassed (El Feki et al. 2017). Even though there are no corresponding data for other countries (to my knowledge), it seems unlikely one would find that same level of support for that view in most other societies. A different survey on street harassment, conducted in the UK, India, Brazil, and Kenya, found that the proportion of people who viewed "upskirting" (taking a photograph up a skirt without permission) as acceptable was three times as high in India as in the other three countries (Gulland 2019).

A nuanced 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 16–49 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, measuring perceived violence using media reports and female employment using National Sample Survey data.

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 choose 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 300 USD, which is almost 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. (2021) 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) find 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 would be 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, male-on-male shoving and violence are 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.

Other research examines how general improvements in public transportation, without a women-only component, can increase female labor supply. Martinez et al. (2018) find such an effect from expansion of the bus rapid transit and elevated rail system in Lima, Peru. Similarly, Seki and Yamada (2020) study the roll-out of the Delhi metro system and find 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 near the man's place of employment.

Sometimes a patriarchal urge to restrict women's freedom is cast as concern about safety. 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).

Dean and Jayachandran (2019) conducted a study among kindergarten teachers in Karnataka, India, a setting in which family members’ discomfort with women interacting with men outside the family is an obstacle to women’s work. They might object to a teacher going door-to-door in the village to recruit students, attending training sessions outside the village, or interacting with male managers. This setting highlights that it is sometimes in employers’ interests to shift norms that stand in the way of women’s employment. They value a larger pool of job applicants, a higher retention rate among employees, and fewer restrictions on the activities that their employees are willing to do.

Dean and Jayachandran (2019) evaluated interventions aimed at dispelling family members’ undue concerns. One of the interventions entailed showing a “family-orientation” video that addressed common concerns about safety to family members. It featured footage filmed at teacher trainings to show what they are like and testimonials from experienced teachers and their family members.<sup>7</sup>

The video discussing safety did not have a measurable impact on how supportive family members were of the woman working or whether she stayed on the job. The null results do not mean that acclimating family members or using employer-driven approaches to shift norms holds no promise. It is possible that the interventions were too light-touch or were deemed “cheap talk.” Also, a better approach might be an industry-wide effort because some of the benefits of shifting norms are enjoyed by other firms; a newly empowered woman might quit her current job to accept a more senior position elsewhere. One approach would be for multiple firms to fund a non-profit aimed at changing the norms that are suppressing female employment.

### 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 this 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 affect 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

<sup>7</sup> A second video shown to families highlighted the non-monetary benefits of employment such as personal growth and self-confidence for the woman. A second intervention in the study facilitated a conversation between the teacher and her family about the pros and cons of her working.





to ways to learn business skills informally. However, the evidence on the benefits of business training is mixed, with many studies finding no impact on profits and others finding modest effects (McKenzie 2020).

One explanation for the sometimes underwhelming impacts of business training is that 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, 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, 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 2-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 a higher volume of business and higher household income 4 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. (2010, 2016), Lafortune et al. (2018) tested the impacts of two separate add-ons to business training in Chile—either a 1-h 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 particularly 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, a woman's money should be channeled to her husband to control. There is a growing body of evidence that this dynamic reduces returns to female entrepreneurship.

Male family members laying claim to women's grants is an example of a broader phenomenon: the lack of a clear division between business and family property 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. One response by women who struggle to retain control over their money is to hide it from their husbands. 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 in the lab game 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 Faf-champs 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 8 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. (2021) 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 open bank accounts for women and set up direct deposit of women's wages into these 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 the intervention did not affect the NREGS wage, it did presumably increase women's control over their



earnings. 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 Against Female Breadwinners

Two other important gender norms 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. The two norms are distinct, and each suppresses female employment. First, a norm that women should not be the primary breadwinner deters some women from working or from working in as high-paying of a job. Second, intimate partner violence (IPV) can influence whether a woman works because being the victim of violence can sap her ability to work. I discuss both norms together in this subsection because much of the evidence on them is intertwined. A main way in which they are related is that IPV sometimes occurs when a woman behaves counter to a gender norm, for example by being the primary earner in her family.

Having higher labor market earnings could either decrease or increase a woman's exposure to 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 reduce 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.

There is also evidence of negative outcomes less extreme than violence, such as unhappiness in the union, occurring when this norm is violated. 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 the 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 and psychological injuries—makes 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 workforce 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

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<sup>8</sup> The 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).



et al. (2021) evaluate the Indonesian government's Conversion to Liquefied Petroleum Gas program and find 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 could also increase female employment.<sup>9</sup> Talamas (2020) provides compelling evidence on the effect of child care availability on female employment in Mexico. In Mexico, like in many low- and middle-income countries, extended family members, specifically grandmothers, often provide child 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 Peticarà (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%. 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) find that access to subsidized daycare 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 daycare affected job choice: Women switched to jobs with more regular hours, earning as much money as before 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 3–4 h per day, likely explaining why the increased female labor supply was concentrated in unpaid work in the family business.

<sup>9</sup> I do not review the literature on family planning programs in this article, but by enabling couples to choose the number and timing of births, such policies can expand women's employment opportunities. In addition, there is a large literature on norms about fertility, which is beyond the scope of this article.



### 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 for policy is to try to directly change 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 (2020), 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. (2020) 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, community 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. The project arose out of an Indian state government's interest in addressing the pervasive gender inequality in its society. A human rights non-profit, Breakthrough, designed a program based on classroom discussions, and the Haryana government granted Breakthrough staff permission to conduct 45-min long sessions during the regular school day once every two to three weeks for the duration of the 2-year program. The program covered gender





roles, recognition and (in)tolerance of gender discrimination, and interpersonal skills such as communication and social interaction between the genders.<sup>10</sup>

Dhar et al. (2020) evaluated the program through a randomized controlled trial in a sample of 314 government secondary schools. They find that the program led to a large shift toward more gender-equitable attitudes. An index of gender attitudes increased, i.e., became more supportive of gender equality, by 0.2 standard deviations, which corresponds to the program successfully changing gender-biased views to become supportive of gender equality 16% of the time. Behavior became more aligned with progressive gender norms, too. The initial impacts were remarkably persistent when the researchers re-surveyed the sample more than 2 years after the program had ended.

While the change in attitudes was similar across genders, the effect on behavior was considerably larger for boys. One explanation is that boys have fewer constraints on their behavior. Valuing gender equality is not sufficient for someone to uphold that value in one's behavior; one also needs agency, which boys have more of. The gender gap in power in society means that attitude change to promote gender equality could be more effective when aimed at males. However, another consideration is that adults' attitudes also influence their children's attitudes, and Dhar et al. (2019) find that mothers exert more influence on both their sons' and their daughters' gender attitudes, perhaps because they spend more time with their children than fathers do. This evidence complements other work on the transmission of gender norms from women to their children, such as Fernandez et al. (2004), who find that if a man's mother worked when he was a child, his wife is more likely to work. Thus, 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 promote 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

<sup>10</sup> One 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.





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.

In some cases, there have been great strides in shifting gender norms; acceptability of intimate partner violence has fallen considerably in some societies in a relatively short amount of time. But other norms are much more entrenched. The norm that women bear primary responsibility for housework and child care might be one of most challenging norms to change, and, moreover, it is present in essentially all societies. The dividend for women's equality if this norm can be reshaped would be tremendous.

Shifting cultural norms about women's work will rarely be easy, but doing so is essential in order to level the playing field for women in the labor market. Policy-making aimed at increasing female employment needs to be informed by societal gender norms and, when possible, seek to break down these barriers to women's work.

**Acknowledgements** I thank Christine Cai, Rebecca Dizon-Ross, and Akhila Kovvuri for helpful comments and UNU WIDER for providing financial support for this work.

#### **Declaration**

**Conflict of interest** The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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