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How Are Gender Norms Perceived?

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2023-33, “[How Are Gender Norms Perceived?](#),” by Leonardo Bursztyn, University of Chicago; Alexander W. Cappelen, Norwegian School of Economics; Bertil Tungodden, Norwegian School of Economics; Alessandra Voena, Stanford University; and David Yanagizawa-Drott, University of Zurich

A new survey across 60 countries shows that misperceptions of gender norms are pervasive: In less gender-equal countries, people underestimate support for women’s basic right to work outside the home and for affirmative action policies, particularly support among men, while in more gender-equal countries, people overestimate support for affirmative action, particularly support among women, and underestimate support for basic rights; such misperceptions may obstruct progress toward gender equality.

Women experience on average worse economic outcomes than men, from lack of basic freedom to work outside the home in some contexts to persistent underrepresentation in public and private leadership positions around the world. It is now well understood that gender norms shape some of these outcomes. More recently, economists have begun to recognize that perceived gender norms may play an important role, too: people may make incorrect assumptions about the support for gender equality or the degree to which it already exists, and such assumptions can restrict progress.

For example, recent work by one of two of the authors of this new research, UChicago economist Leonardo Bursztyn and David Yanagizawa-Drott from Zurich (together with UChicago’s Alessandra González) reveals that the vast majority of men in Saudi Arabia privately support women working outside the home, but underestimate the extent to which others share this view (see BFI Research Brief and Working Paper “[Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia](#)”). The authors show that a

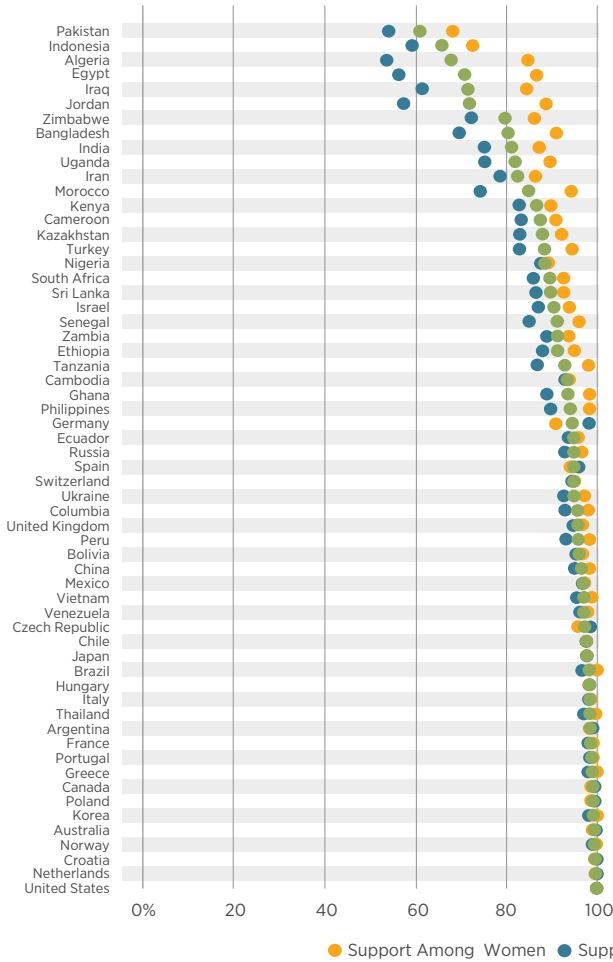
simple policy intervention corrects such misperceptions and leads to a significant increase in women’s involvement in labor markets. If men are informed, for example, that other men share their views, then such ideas become more publicly acceptable and, thus, advance change for women.

However, do these findings hold across space? Do they only apply to the particular cultural constructs within Saudi Arabia, or do they hold for all countries, even those with more gender-equal norms? To address these and related questions, the authors of this new research employ a novel dataset from 60 countries, as a new module of the Gallup World Poll 2020, representing over 80% of the world population. The survey measures the respondents’ support for two distinct policy-relevant issues: 1) whether women should be free to work outside of their home (**basic rights**), and 2) whether women should be given priority when hiring for leadership positions (**affirmative action**). Crucially, the survey also measures perceived norms, i.e., what each respondent thought the support for these issues people

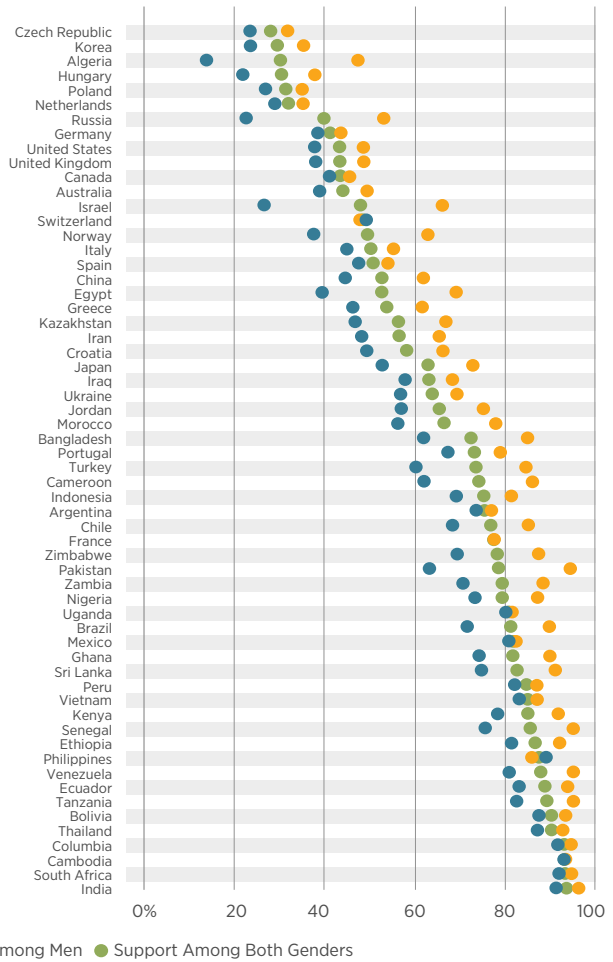
¹Published in the American Economic Review (2020), 110(10): 2997-3029.

Figure 1 • Global Outlook: Gender Norms

A) Support for Basic Rights



B) Support for Affirmative Action



Note: Average support for basic rights and affirmative action among women (yellow), among men (blue), and pooled across gender (green), in a given country. Data: Gallup 2020, country-level.

in their country is. Perceptions were elicited separately for the support among men and the support among women. This novel dataset reveals the following insights:

- There is widespread support for women’s basic right to work outside of the home across the world: a majority of the population is in favor in all 60 countries, often by a wide margin. Importantly, while the share of women in favor is essentially always higher, a majority of men favor women’s basic rights in all countries.
- In all countries in the sample, respondents on average underestimate the extent to which people in their country support women’s basic right to work outside the home, and particularly men’s support. These findings are in line with what documented in Saudi Arabia, but on a global scale.
- Regarding affirmative action, the authors find majority support from both men and women in 37 countries, while in 12 countries a majority of both do not support it. Further, affirmative action for women is strongly negatively associated with the level of gender equality in the country, with, on average, the

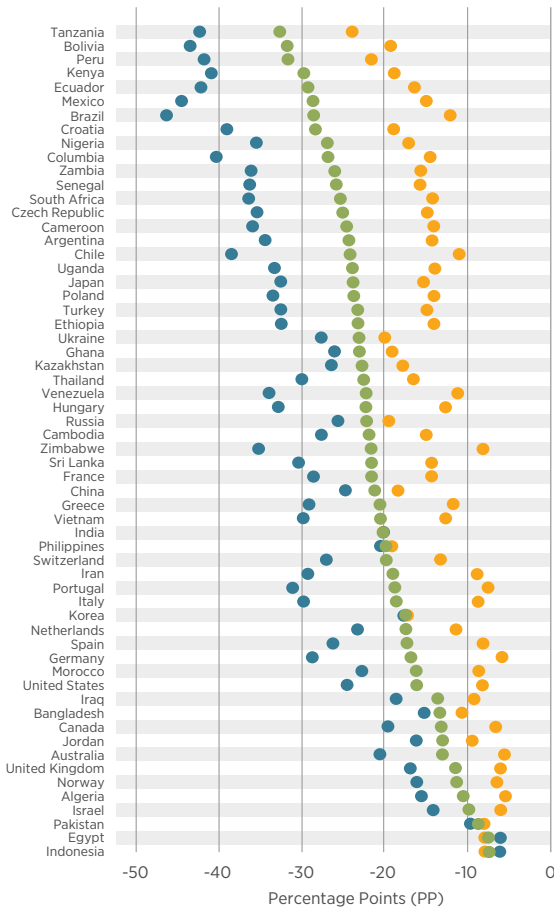
majority of the population being against affirmative action for women in the most gender-equal countries. Similar to basic rights, more women than men support affirmative action for women in virtually all countries.

- Perceptions of others’ support for affirmative action exhibit a perhaps surprising pattern. Just as for basic rights, in less gender-equal countries, men’s support is systematically underestimated. In more gender-equal countries, women’s support is instead systematically overestimated.
- The authors also consider potential mechanisms that could be driving the documented misperceptions and find two nearly universal forces at play: the overweighting of the minority view and widespread stereotyping of men and women.

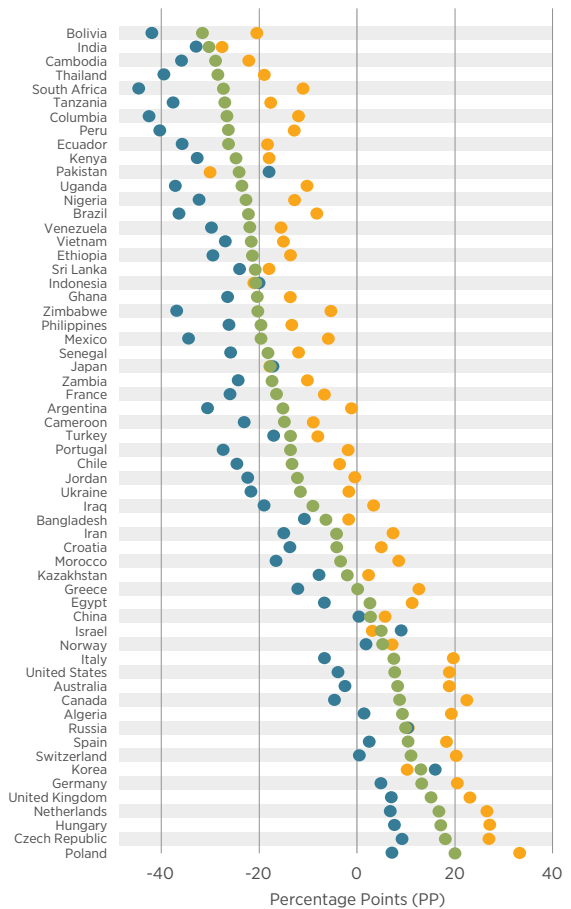
Bottom line: Around the world, people underestimate support for basic women’s rights. This work reveals that restricting female employment based on perceived peers’ opinion is likely acting erroneously. Aligning perceived and actual views, then, may raise female labor force participation outside the home by shifting perceived

Figure 2 • Global Outlook: Misperceptions about Gender Norms

A) Misperceptions About Support for Basic Rights



B) Misperceptions About Support for Affirmative Action



● Misperceptions About Women ● Misperceptions About Men ● Misperceptions About Both Genders

Note: Misperceptions about support for basic rights and affirmative action among women (yellow), among men (blue), and pooled across gender (green), in a given country. Misperceptions are defined as the difference between a respondent's perception of the support for an issue in their country and the actual support in their country. Data: Gallup 2020, country-level.

social norms in a way that is actually consistent with the underlying opinions of a society. The implications for affirmative action are less clean-cut, but the study suggests that in countries like the United States, women may be substantially less in favor of such policy than widely believed (for example, women may infer that affirmative action will devalue their achievements.)

Finally, while heterogeneity across countries does not lend itself to broad policy prescriptions, the authors' methodology offers interventions that could align actual and perceived norms, and thereby move countries to embrace greater gender equality.

READ THE WORKING PAPER

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