

Male Social Status and Women’s Work[†]

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Female labor force participation varies significantly across cultural groups within the same country and among countries with similar levels of economic development (Fernández and Fogli 2009). Recent studies have emphasized that cultural values and gender norms—standards describing desirable behavior¹—are important determinants of women’s work (see, for instance, Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn 2013; Fernández 2013; Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan 2015).

This literature has focused on how aggregate, community-level attitudes relate to rates of female labor supply. But the impact of community norms on individual work behavior is likely mediated by intra-household dynamics—for example, both men and women could face norm-driven social costs if a wife works.

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[†]Go to <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20181086> to visit the article page for additional materials and author disclosure statement(s).

¹Our definition of a social norm follows an approach commonly taken in the psychology literature in which a norm reflects average beliefs held by a group (Bicchieri and Muldoon 2014; Tankard and Paluck 2016). Similarly, Akerlof and Kranton (2000) propose a model in which an individual’s identity is defined by the social category—and its corresponding standards for behavior—to which she belongs.

When men and women bear different costs of violating norms, intra-household bargaining will mediate the role that norms play in governing female labor supply. Observational data suggests this may be the case: in 75 of the 76 countries covered by the World Values Survey, women express more support for female labor than men.² Yet the relationships between norms, men and women’s personal preferences, and women’s actual employment decisions are not well understood.

In this paper, we use data on husbands’ and wives’ personal beliefs and perceptions of their spouses’ and community attitudes to shed light on how norms are internalized, and acted upon, within the household. Our approach is grounded in the idea that norms may differentially impact men and women: for instance, while the community attitude that “husbands of women who work are bad providers” may make female labor costly for men, it need not be as much of a deterrent for women. Similarly a norm dictating that “good wives stay at home with the children” could be disproportionately costly for women.

Our data are gathered from a setting in which women have limited agency, especially with regards to their engagement with the outside world. Households in our sample live in poor, rural areas of Madhya Pradesh, India. Only 41 percent of women report having traveled to the village market alone in the past year and, in one third of households, women would not be allowed to go unaccompanied to the local health center even in the case of an emergency. Within-household constraints on women’s labor supply are strong: 72 percent of women in our sample report that their husband has primary decision-making power with regards to their

²Field et al. (2017) combine 2010–2014 World Values Survey data and create a standardized index of support for female labor force participation by aggregating responses to four questions on attitudes toward women’s work. See their paper for further details of this analysis.

work. Moreover, spouses' preferences often diverge: in 40 percent of households, husbands and wives hold different opinions about whether it is appropriate for women to accept a paid job outside the home.

When husbands and wives have different views on women's work, what factors matter for female labor supply decisions? We begin by reporting on spouses' priorities (their preference, for instance, for community respect over financial stability) and differences in how they internalize community norms. Here we study *perceived* norms—men's and women's beliefs regarding the strength of community attitudes for or against female labor. Note that since individuals may overweight or underweight different sources of information, their subjective perceptions of norms could be biased (in that they do not reflect actual community attitudes). We focus on perceived norms rather than actual norms (the true average community beliefs) since individuals' perceptions are what matter for decision-making (Tankard and Paluck 2016).

Next, we study how spouses' preferences correlate with actual work outcomes. Using detailed data on husbands' and wives' views on the acceptability of female work and on women's take-up of a verifiable work opportunity, we assess whose preferences matter, and when, for wives' employment.

I. Data

The data for our analysis come from a follow-up survey and work intervention that were administered as part of a randomized controlled experiment on female labor force participation in Madhya Pradesh (MP).³ Our study sample is comprised of 3,815 married couples who reside in four neighboring districts of northern MP.

Women in our sample are of working age: they tend to be in their mid-forties and have nearly all had children. In order to assess their willingness to work, we subsidized the creation of a temporary work opportunity for all women in our sample. Female respondents were invited to work as day laborers for land owners in our study area.⁴

³See Field et al. (2017) for preliminary results.

⁴Landowners in our study areas recruited sample women to work as laborers for one day on their fields and were compensated by the research team for the women's wages. Women were paid wages in line with local market rates.

We find that demand for work is quite high: 61 percent of female respondents participated in the work intervention or reported another paid work engagement as a reason why they did not attend. But the high rate of female labor force participation likely reflects low levels of income rather than positive attitudes toward female employment (respondents' level of support for women's work is discussed below). Most sample households live on less than US\$2.50 a day.

Our household survey, which husbands and wives each completed in private, collected data on gender norms and individuals' personal values. First, we elicited respondents' direct belief regarding the appropriateness of women's work for pay outside the home. We find that there is considerable disagreement between men and women. As shown in Table 1, men are 41 percent more likely than women to say that it is not appropriate for women to work for pay and, in one quarter of households, the female respondent believes that women should be allowed to work for pay while her husband does not. Spouses are also very frequently ill-informed about each other's opinions regarding this same question. Fewer than 60 percent of female and 65 percent of male respondents correctly report their spouse's belief about women's work.

Spousal disagreement extends to men's and women's priorities. Using a ladder approach, respondents ranked the following attributes according to what was most important to them at that time: financial stability; community respect; a harmonious relationship with one's spouse; wife's obedience and husband's control within the relationship; and wife's decision-making power in the household.⁵

Men's most common first priority is community respect, and they are twice as likely as women to rank this attribute first. Instead, women prioritize obedience to their husbands: 40 percent of them give it top rank, compared to only about a quarter of men. Since women's work is likely to involve a trade-off between financial stability and community respect, respondents were also given nine coins to divide between these two characteristics, representing their relative valuations of them. On average, women give equal value to each attribute; men,

⁵See online Appendix Table A2 for an exact description of all survey questions described in this paper.

TABLE 1—HOUSEHOLD BELIEFS

	Women	Men	<i>p</i> -value of difference
<i>Panel A. Personal beliefs</i>			
Women shouldn't work	0.236	0.333	(0.000)
Coins to community respect not income	4.597	5.340	(0.000)
Most important in life is obedience to husband	0.395	0.260	(0.000)
Most important in life is community respect	0.131	0.265	(0.000)
<i>Panel B. Beliefs about spouse opinion</i>			
Spouse believes women shouldn't work	0.334	0.312	(0.045)
Correct about spouse belief	0.587	0.636	(0.000)
<i>Panel C. Perception of community norms</i>			
Husband pays social cost if wife works	0.443	0.685	(0.000)
Share of community that speaks badly about			
Working woman	0.384	0.438	(0.000)
Working woman's husband	0.416	0.559	(0.000)
Number of households	3,815		

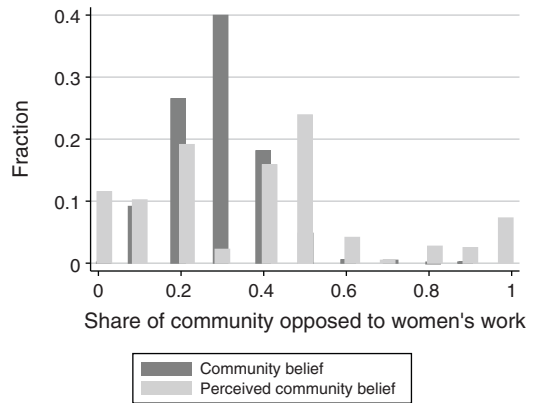
on the other hand, give higher priority to community respect.

To measure individuals' perception of community norms, respondents were given ten coins to represent the population in their community. Using these coins, respondents indicated what share of their community would speak badly of a woman if she worked for pay and what share would believe this woman's husband to be a bad provider.

We find that male respondents perceive the community norm against women's work to be much stronger than do female respondents. The gap in perceived norm is especially stark when it comes to standards for men's behavior: women believe that 42 percent of their community would think badly of husbands of working women, while men's estimate was 35 percent higher.⁶ We also elicited respondents' direct assessment of whether a wife or her husband would bear more of the social cost of her work and find that almost 70 percent of men perceive husbands to be the main recipient of social punishment. In comparison, female respondents believe the cost to be roughly equally shared between spouses.

⁶Responses given in terms of coins are converted to a variable which ranges from zero to one.

Panel A. Women's perceptions of community beliefs



Panel B. Men's perceptions of community beliefs

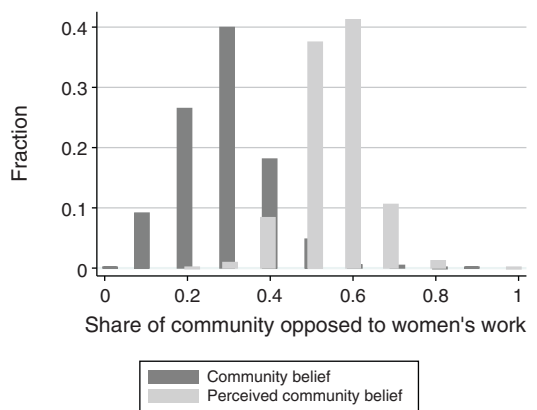


FIGURE 1. PERCEIVED VERSUS ACTUAL SHARE OF COMMUNITY OPPOSED TO WOMEN'S WORK

How accurate are men's and women's perceptions of community norms against female work? In Figure 1, we show the distributions of female and male respondents' perceived community beliefs and the distribution of actual community beliefs on the acceptability of women's work. We use the set of sample respondents in a Gram Panchayat (GP) (which is the lowest government administrative level and the sampling unit for our study) to proxy for the set of persons that respondents have in mind when considering their community.⁷

As shown in Figure 1, both men and women overestimate the strength of attitudes against

⁷This is, of course, an imperfect proxy. Figure 1 therefore confounds gaps in actual versus perceived norms with measurement error in actual norms.

female work. Both distributions of perceived beliefs are skewed toward a higher share of the community being against women's work than the distribution of actual average beliefs. But the size of men's average mistake is much larger. On average, about 30 percent of respondents in a GP report that they disapprove of women's work. Women overestimate the community norm against work by about 10 percentage points. Men's estimate, on the other hand, is almost double the true level of disapproval in the community: they estimate that 56 percent of community members would think badly of working women/their husbands.

Understanding the reasons for men's bias in estimating community attitudes is outside the scope of our paper. That said, this finding is in line with the literature on norm perception in psychology, which emphasizes that agents are more attentive to norms that are consistent with their own beliefs and that individuals take cues from the behavior of "social referents"—persons who have a high status or many personal connections within the perceiver's social network (Tankard and Paluck 2016). We find that husbands and wives have different personal beliefs about female labor and, given that gender segregation is prevalent in their day-to-day activities, their social referents likely differ.

We find that men are more opposed than women to female work and perceive the costs to violating community standards against work to be higher. Husbands' and wives' priorities are also divergent: while men place high value on meeting these community standards, women report that obedience to their spouse and harmony within the household are most important to them. But do these stated preferences have any bearing on actual behavior? In the next section, we ask whether spouses' preferences and beliefs regarding community norms can successfully predict women's labor force participation.

II. Estimation

Whose preferences matter for women's take-up of work for pay? Though we do not have causal estimates of this relationship, we can investigate the extent to which women's versus their husbands' support for (or opposition to) female labor predicts actual employment decisions.

The specification in equation (1) regresses household preferences and perceived norms on

Y_{ip} , a binary variable for whether the female respondent participated in the work intervention or completed other work for pay on the same day.^{8,9} Since men very often have primary decision-making power over their wife's labor force participation, we expect their beliefs (M_Pref_{ip}) to matter more than women's own personal beliefs (F_Pref_{ip}) for whether women work. Additionally, since men report that community respect is their top priority, we hypothesize a negative correlation between men's perception of the community's attitude toward women's work (M_Norm_{ip}) and their wife's work take-up. Conversely, women prioritize obedience to their husband and their husband's control in their relationship. We therefore hypothesize a negative correlation between female respondents' labor participation and whether they perceive their husband to be opposed to women's work ($F_Spouse Pref_{ip}$).

$$(1) \quad Y_{ip} = \eta_0 + \eta_1 F_Pref_{ip} + \eta_2 M_Pref_{ip} \\ + \eta_3 F_SpousePref_{ip} + \eta_4 F_Norm_{ip} \\ + \eta_5 M_Norm_{ip} + \epsilon_{ip}.$$

Though women's personal beliefs are correlated with their work outcomes (column 1 of Table 2), the association disappears with the inclusion of husbands' personal beliefs and women's perception of their husband's personal beliefs (column 2). The coefficient on women's *perception* of their husband's preference is more than twice as large as the coefficient on their husband's *actual* self-reported preference and we can reject that these coefficients are equal. This result is consistent with women's desire to be obedient and with our finding that spouses are often ill-informed about one another's opinion. The correlation also suggests that women do indeed have some degree of agency to decide whether to work conditional on their husband's actual belief.

Norms also matter. As shown in column 3, a shift in the husband's perception of the

⁸Surveyors visited each household on the day after the work intervention. Women who did not participate in the intervention were asked why they did not attend. Women who reported that they had another work commitment are considered as having worked on the day of the intervention. See online Appendix Table A1 for details of this intervention.

⁹We cluster errors at the level of the GP.

TABLE 2—WHAT PREDICTS WOMEN'S TAKE-UP OF WORK?

	Female worked (1)	Female worked (2)	Female worked (3)
<i>Panel A. Personal beliefs and perception of spousal beliefs</i>			
Wife belief: women shouldn't work	-0.093 (0.020)	-0.024 (0.025)	-0.024 (0.025)
Husband belief: women shouldn't work		-0.037 (0.018)	-0.034 (0.018)
Wife perceives: husband believes women shouldn't work		-0.100 (0.021)	-0.098 (0.021)
<i>Panel B. Perception of community norms</i>			
Female perceives: community thinks badly of wife			-0.028 (0.030)
Male perceives: community thinks badly of husband			-0.055 (0.028)
Mean of outcome	0.61 [0.49]	0.61 [0.49]	0.61 [0.49]
Number of households	3,616	3,616	3,616

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

proportion of the community against women's work from zero to one is associated with a 5.5 percentage point reduction in the probability that his wife worked. The magnitude of this coefficient is nearly twice as large as the magnitude of the coefficient on his own opinion about women's work. Women's perceived norms are not significantly correlated with their work outcomes, though we cannot reject that the coefficients on male and female perceived norms are equal.

III. Conclusion

Our analysis has three key results. First, we find evidence of important gender asymmetries in the perceived social costs associated with female work—respondents report that the husband of a working wife will receive sanction from more community members than the wife herself. Consistent with this, men are systematically more likely than women to voice opposition to women working. Second, we find substantial misalignment between individuals' beliefs about their spouse's preferences and

their spouse's actual preference. Finally, we find evidence that these measures have important informational content, in that they significantly correlate with actual female labor supply.

Characterizing how norms and beliefs vary across genders and within households is important for understanding the myriad social forces that govern women's labor market choices. Additional research on how norms and beliefs are formed, and on their causal effect on female labor force participation, are needed to carry this research agenda forward.

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1. Leonardo Burszty, Alessandra L. González, David Yanagizawa-Drott. 2020. Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia. *American Economic Review* **110**:10, 2997-3029. [[Abstract](#)] [[View PDF article](#)] [[PDF with links](#)]