The Effects of Misperceptions of Social Norms on Female Labor Force Participation in Saudi Arabia

Researchers:

Leonardo Bursztyn

Alessandra González

David Yanagizawa-Drott

Sector(s): Gender, Labor Markets

Location: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Sample: 500 Saudi married men

Target group: Job seekers Women and girls

Outcome of interest: Employment Women's/girls' decision-making

Intervention type: Information Norms change

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In Saudi Arabia, social norms require women to receive approval from a male "guardian" (typically husband or father) prior to working. The country also has one of the lowest female participation rates in the labor market, at less than 15 percent for females above 15 years in 2017. Yet, while the majority of men in Saudi Arabia do support female labor force participation, they underestimate the level of support of other men. Researchers evaluated whether offering men in Saudi Arabia simple information on other men's perceptions of female labor force participation impacts their willingness to let their wives join the labor force. Wives of men who received this information were significantly more likely to have applied and interviewed for a job outside of the home.

Policy issue

In recent years, many countries around the world have sought to increase female labor force participation rates and close existing gender gaps. Female labor force participation remains especially low in most countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. Gender biases in certain sectors, hostile environments for women in the workplace, and social norms are all barriers to female labor force participation.

In some cases, people privately reject norms that stigmatize female labor force participation but are reluctant to reveal or act on their own views for fear of social consequences. However, if these views are shared by a majority, will correcting misperceptions about what others believe have an impact on women's labor market participation?

Context of the evaluation

This evaluation takes place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital city. The Kingdom of Saudi government lifted the ban limiting women's right to drive. While such efforts may ease women's mobility constraints and improve their access to work, other barriers still exist. For example, married women in Saudi Arabia are expected to seek approval from their husbands prior to working. Thus, even if a man privately rejects a social norm, he may continue to follow it based on his incorrect beliefs of what

other people believe for fear of social sanctions.

This evaluation was conducted in partnership with a local branch of an international survey company. Researchers identified 500 married men between the ages of 18 and 35 through a recruiter database to participate in the study. The men were required to have at least some college education and a smartphone. In an anonymous online survey, 87 percent of these participants agreed with the statement: “In my opinion, women should be allowed to work outside the home.” At baseline, 65 percent of participants’ wives were employed and in a follow-up survey it was discovered that only 8 percent of participants’ wives worked outside the home.



Women in Saudi Arabia.

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Details of the intervention

Researchers evaluated whether offering men in Saudi Arabia simple information on other men’s perceptions of female labor force participation impacts their willingness to let their wives join the labor force.

Participants attended sessions with 29 other individuals from a similar geographical area. Many also shared social networks; the average participant reported knowing fifteen of the other 29 session participants. During the sessions, participants filled out anonymous surveys using their smartphones. They answered questions regarding their opinions on a range of labor market related topics including women’s participation in work outside the home. Participants were also asked to estimate how many of the other 29 session participants they believed would agree with certain statements about female labor force participation. The closest estimate would receive a $20 Amazon gift card.

Half of the participants were then randomly assigned to receive information on the other participants' responses to the statements about female labor participation. Participants in the comparison group were given no information on other participants' responses.

Following the surveys, all participants were provided information about a Saudi startup which provides an online platform connecting job-seeking Saudi women with employers. They were asked to choose between receiving a $5 Amazon gift card and the opportunity to sign up their wives for access to the startup's platform and services. The service included a weekly email linking to postings for jobs outside of home for women in the participants' areas. Men who chose to sign up for the service were then asked to provide their spouse's contact information.

Researchers partnered with the same survey company three to five months later to estimate longer term labor market outcomes over phone interviews, asking the participants a number of questions regarding their wife's employment.

Results and policy lessons

Perceptions of other participants' views: Researchers found that approximately 72 percent of participants in this study underestimated other participants' support for female labor force participation. They also found that there is evidence to show a persistent change in perceptions of men who received simple information in that they update their views of their neighbors' support for female labor force participation.

Impact on choosing job matching services: Receiving information on other participants' opinions increased the proportion of men who signed up for the job matching service by 9 percentage points from 23 percent in the comparison group (a 36 percent increase). This increase can be attributed to those who underestimated the true number of supporters of female labor force participation in their sessions. Among these individuals, sign-up rates increased by 12 percentage points (a 57 percent increase) above the 21 percent of men in the comparison group who had underestimated the support for female labor force participation. However, receiving information did not change sign up rates among those who did not underestimate support for female labor force participation.

Longer term impact on behavior and beliefs: Wives of participants who were offered feedback on other participants' opinions were significantly more likely to have applied for a job outside the home by 10 percentage points compared to 6 percentage points in the comparison group (180 percent increase). They are also more likely to have interviewed for a job outside of home by 5 percentage points compared to 1 percentage point in the comparison group (449 percent increase). In addition, participants who received feedback on the opinions of other participants were significantly more likely to report that they would sign their wives up for driving lessons.

These results show that providing information to update misperceptions about certain beliefs and social norms that may help lift constraints on female labor force participation. More research is needed to better understand the root causes of the stigma against women working, along with how women make labor market decisions in this context.