The Impact of Correcting Men's Misperceptions of Beliefs about Gender: Implications for Female Labor Participation and Time Use in India

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Sector(s): Gender

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Fieldwork: Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)

Sample: 25,000 married couples in India

Target group: Mothers and pregnant women Men and boys Women and girls Adults Families and households

Outcome of interest: Employment Empowerment Gender attitudes and norms

Intervention type: Information Norms change

Partner organization(s): Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)

Female labor force participation in India is one of the lowest in the world, and studies suggest this is partially the result of restrictive gender norms about women's employment, household work, and childcare responsibilities. In India, researchers are conducting a randomized evaluation to test the effects of providing men with correct information about other men's views of women's labor market participation.

Policy issue

The rates of female labor force participation in India are among the lowest in the world. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the rates were declining: from more than 26 percent in 2005 to 20.3 percent in 2019. During July–September 2020, they fell to 16.1 percent, the lowest among major economies.[1], Studies suggest that restrictive gender stereotypes, which dictate what men and women should and should not do, contribute to low levels of female labor force participation in India. People may benefit from behaving according to these gender stereotypes because they receive greater respect from society, or because they feel a sense of satisfaction from believing that they are behaving appropriately. However, people may have inaccurate beliefs about what other consider to be appropriate. They may behave according to these incorrect assumptions even if those actions are contrary to their own private beliefs. In these situations, people might change their behaviors if they are provided with information to correct these misperceptions. Previous research has found that providing men with correct information about other men's perceptions of female labor force participation increased their wives' labor force activities.[2] Can correcting men's misperceptions about the beliefs of other men increase women's labor market participation?

Context of the evaluation

This study takes place in India, one of the few countries to have experienced a decline in female labor participation over the last decades. Some conditions in India may lend themselves to misperceptions of others' beliefs about gender norms. For instance,

low rates of female labor force participation (which may partially arise from reduced availability of jobs) may lead some people to believe that others think women should stay at home–even if privately others have changed their personal views. Previous research of a non-representative sample of married couples in the Indian state of Madya Pradesh found that both wives and husbands overestimated community norms against women's work. Misperceptions may also arise from the disproportionate prominence of views from older, more gender-conservative men, who tend to hold local leadership positions. Additionally, in the Indian context, people from lower castes may, in an effort to raise their social standing, behave in alignment with inaccurate beliefs about what the higher castes view as appropriate.

This evaluation is in partnership with the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, a think tank and business information company that conducts the Consumer Pyramids and Household Survey (CPHS) across India.[3] The participants in the study are about 25,000 married couples with wives that are of working age (18 to 55 years old). The couples are nationally representative and are spread out across 200 districts and more than 80 homogenous regions (HR) in urban and rural India. An HR is a cluster of about three neighboring districts in the same state that share similar agro-climactic conditions, levels of urbanization, and female literacy rates.

Women working at a marketplace in India.

Photo: Paula Bronstein | Getty Images | Images of Empowerment

Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of offering married men in India information about other men's perceptions of female labor force participation. Researchers were interested in how receiving this information would impact men's willingness to allow their working-age wives to join the labor force. The intervention was divided into three waves.

The first involved the collection of data before the intervention was implemented. During the second wave, some of the men were randomly selected to receive correct information. Finally, during the third wave, researchers collected information on the behaviors and beliefs of the households to determine whether and how they had changed because of the intervention. The waves are detailed below.

During the first wave of the study (four months prior to the intervention) the researchers collected information about men's personal views about gender roles, and what they believe other men believe about those gender roles (including men from castes that are the same, higher, and lower than theirs). They also surveyed men about their beliefs concerning local working women's earnings. The researchers used data from the CPHS to obtain information about women's actual earnings.

During the second wave of the study, the married men were randomly assigned to two groups: one served as the comparison group and received no information, and the other group (of men from about 18,000 households) received accurate information about the norms in the community. Within this group, different subsets of men received different types of additional information.

1. The first group received information about the beliefs of other men in their same caste, religion, and state on whether female labor force participation is right and appropriate.
2. The second group received information about the beliefs of Schedule caste men of their religion in their state on whether female labor force participation is right and appropriate.
3. The third group received information about the beliefs of Upper caste (e.g. Brahmin)[4] men of their religion in their state on whether female labor force participation is right and appropriate.
4. The fourth group received information about the beliefs of other men in their same caste of their religion and state about whether female labor force participation decreases the man's social status.
5. The fifth group received information about the beliefs of Scheduled caste men of their religion in their state about whether female labor force participation decreases the man's social status.
6. The sixth group received information about the beliefs of Upper caste men of their religion in their state about whether female labor force participation decreases the man's social status.

Also during the second wave of the study, researchers asked all men whether they were interested in obtaining information about organizations and websites that help connect women with labor market opportunities or local organizations that provide job training opportunities for women.

Four months later, during the third wave of the study, researchers used the CPHS to collect information on the labor force participation of each household member, including their willingness to work, job search behavior, and their use of time on labor market activities, childcare activities, and chores. The researchers also added more detailed questions about the intensity of job search activities, job search methods, distance from the workplace to the home, and nature of the workplace. Additionally, researchers collected information on female autonomy and empowerment, through questions such as whether the wife is the primary decision-maker or provides input in household spending, and where the wife can go outside the home without permission. Researchers collected this information directly from the wives whenever possible.

Also during the third wave, researchers re-asked the married men the same questions they asked in the first wave of the study: about their personal views about gender roles, what they believe others believe about those gender roles, and their beliefs concerning local working women's earnings and safety risks. Beyond the third wave of the study, researchers will continue tracking outcomes through the CPHS.

Results and policy lessons

Research ongoing; results forthcoming.

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2. Bursztyn, Leonardo, Alessandra L. González, and David Yanagizawa-Drott. "Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia" Working Paper, March 2020. Forthcoming AER https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/effects-misperceptions-social-norms-female-labor-force-participation-saudi-arabia

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4. “What is India’s caste system?” *BBC*. June 19, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616.