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PANEL DISCUSSION

Changing social norms to achieve gender equality: expectations and opportunities

Overcoming Barriers to Gender Equality: Gender Norms and Stereotypes

by

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

1. Introduction

Despite progress in narrowing educational gaps between women and men over the last two decades, gender inequality in material well-being persists. As a result, researchers and policy makers are turning their attention to other factors that may be inhibiting positive change.

Sociologists have argued that material inequality between women and men is buttressed by social definitions – that is, a set of gender ideology, norms, and stereotypes (Chafetz 1989). Gender ideologies are overarching narratives that justify the gender imbalance in power and resources. In some countries, there has been progress with gender ideologies reflecting a greater belief in gender equality. But even in these societies, narrowing of the material gaps between men and women has slowed or stalled.

We now have a better understanding that “stealth factors”—biases that may be conscious or unconscious—operate at the micro level and are embedded in a variety of social institutions, inhibiting progress toward gender equality. Gender norms and stereotypes are part of this network of factors that influence the behavior of individuals and institutions, often unconsciously, mostly in ways that advantage men’s control over society’s prized assets such as jobs and leadership positions. They also rationalize the exploitation of women’s labor—defined as payments for work that are below their actual value.

It is useful to carefully define what we mean by norms and stereotypes. Stereotypes classify people into groups, and generalize about the attitudes, traits, or behavior patterns of those groups. Gender stereotypes in particular describe the manner in which men and women are assumed to differ, usually in ways that justify the gender division of labor with men dominating in paid work and women responsible for a disproportionate share of unpaid work. Examples of gender stereotypes are 1) women are more nurturing than men, and are therefore better suited to care for children and others; 2) men are intellectually and emotionally more suited to leadership roles than women; 3) women are good at social services and men are good at math, good with money, and more adept at using technology.

Norms are rules that are enforced by members of a community. Gender norms specify acceptable behavioral boundaries for women and men. Because they are internalized, they lead to self-policing in order to conform to social expectations. Examples include 1) men are the breadwinners in their families, 2) men are tough; 3) women should do the housework, and 4) in hierarchical organizations, men should hold positions of power and women should hold subordinate positions.

An example of the norms about men’s role in providing income to their families is highlighted in the World Values Survey. In its most recent survey, almost 40% of respondents agreed that when jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women. This contrasts to only 9% who agree that a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl. (The percentage that holds this latter attitude in support of educational inequality has been declining over time, serving as evidence that norms can and do change).

To the extent that gender ideology, norms, and stereotypes instill an acceptability of gender gaps in everyday behavior, there is less need to employ overt forms of power to maintain gender

hierarchies. Such norms and stereotypes affect not only adults, but perhaps more importantly, also children's socialization, with children internalizing the boundaries placed on their behavior and the behavioral expectations they learn.

2. Why Norms and Stereotypes Matter

Why should we be concerned about gender unequal norms and stereotypes? The simple answer is that norms and stereotypes affect the economic well-being of men and women in ways that advantage men and disadvantage women. Take the following example. The most frequent mainstream argument for gender inequality is that women have fewer skills than men. And yet, in the last 20 years, substantial progress has been made in closing educational gaps and in a number of regions, women's educational attainment is greater than men's. Despite the virtual closure of the skills gap, the stereotype persists that men are more qualified than women for many jobs and even when in the same job, deserve higher pay.

Sociological research tells us that employers routinely undervalue (or overvalue) the individual's qualifications. For example, in recruitment and promotion, an experiment in the United States showed that evaluators were significantly more likely to rely on group stereotypes, rather than past performance, when evaluating individuals (Bohnet, van Green, and Bazerman 2012).¹

This result is consistent with a famous set of experiments known as the Asch conformity experiments. In these experiments, one third to one half of the subjects make a judgment contrary to objective fact and in conformity with the group. This underscores the power of conformity and normative social influence—the willingness to conform publicly to attain social reward and avoid social punishment.

We should also be concerned with unequal gender norms and stereotypes because they disproportionately allocate unpaid labor to women, limiting their ability to participate in paid labor and further contributing to economic inequality. Where women are in the paid labor force, norms and stereotypes that shape the gender division of labor serve to ratify women's sequestration in part-time work, dead-end jobs, and jobs that do not require the use of machinery or technology. In contrast, men are seen as more deserving of high status jobs and power. These stereotypes are critical impediments to gender equality, of which a key element is gender equality in paid work. A closure of income gaps in labor markets and entrepreneurship is a key means to equalize bargaining positions within the household and to influence the allocation of household income and care work in a more equitable way.

3. Institutions and the possibilities for changing gender unequal norms and stereotypes

Gender norms and stereotypes are embedded in political, legal, religious, cultural, and economic institutions (such as labor markets, but also in national institutions that make macroeconomic policy). Because these domains structure access to and control over resources, they also reproduce, strengthen, and legitimate unequal gender systems. To give an example, many organized religions reserve leadership roles only for men; a number emphasize women's primary role as mother and men's as breadwinner. Seguino (2011) finds evidence that religiosity

¹ In contrast, in joint evaluations in which a person's work is evaluated relative to another's, evaluation focused on individual performance, reducing the impact of biased gender stereotypes.

has a negative impact on gender attitudes and that these unequal attitudes translate into unequal material conditions for women relative to men.

A key step to promoting gender equitable norms and stereotypes, therefore, is to engage in institutional change. Take the following example. In the absence of paid parental leave, the parent with the lowest income or wage is typically tapped to stay at home with infants and young children. Social policy that incentivizes men to stay home with children (various forms of parental leave, including the Swedish version that offers a “use it or lose it” paid leave for fathers) can allow more women to combine work and family, and thereby undermine the gender norm that women are the caretakers and men the providers. This bolsters women’s access to economic resources.

Moreover, women’s increased participation in labor markets has been found to contribute to more gender egalitarian views on women’s roles (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). Seguino (2007) finds evidence that, controlling for GDP growth, increases in women’s share of employment in 70 countries, has had a demonstrably positive effect on gender attitudes, which embody gender norms and stereotypes.

The mechanism by which women’s increased share of employment affects norms and attitudes is complex. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of direct reinforcement and modeling in shaping children’s behavior and attitudes. Thus, as children observe their mothers engaging in paid work, and men in care work, they internalize equivalent gender norms. Cognitive theories, such as gender schema theory, posit that children at a very early age recognize that they are a boy or a girl. This categorization serves as a magnet for new information and the child begins assimilating new experiences into this schema. Broad distinctions between what kinds of behaviors and activities go with each gender is acquired by observing other children, and through the reinforcement they receive from their parents.

These findings suggest that norms and stereotypes, though slow to change, are not fixed. For instance, cross-cultural evidence demonstrates that norms and stereotypes have changed relatively quickly in response to political and economic transitions (Diekman, Goodfriend, and Goodwin 2004; Diekman, Eagly, Mladinic, and Ferreira 2005).

An interesting example of the flexibility of gender norms and stereotypes is outlined in a study that evaluates the effects of an experimental intervention in Brazil (Barker, Marcos Nascimento, Segundo, and Pulerwitz 2000). “Program H” (“H” refers to *homens*, Portuguese for men) was designed to improve attitudes and reduce risk behaviors of young Brazilian men as a means to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDs. Studies increasingly recognize that the promotion of safe sex requires a change in the attitudes of young men. Risky behaviors have been associated with more traditional gender attitudes among young men (Clarke, Hutchinson, and Weiss 2004). “Program H” used interactive group activities and “social marketing” to help young men question traditional gender norms related to masculinity and to promote the abilities of men to engage in more gender-equitable relationships with their female partners. Barker, Nascimento, Segundo, and Puerwitz (2000) found a substantial reduction in gender inequality attitudes from the baseline after six months. A one-year, follow-up study showed that the change in attitudes persisted. This intervention represents a concerted effort to change norms, and makes clear that change is possible in a relatively short period of time.

In another example, Beaman, *et al* (2009) investigates whether having a female chief councilor on Indian village councils affects public opinion towards female leaders. They find that

villagers who have never been required to have a female leader (under gender quotas) prefer male leaders and perceive hypothetical female leaders as less effective than their male counterpart. However, exposure to a female leader is shown to eliminate the negative bias in how female leaders' effectiveness is perceived among male villagers.

At first glance, this result might appear to contradict the finding noted earlier that evaluators were significantly more likely to rely on group stereotypes, rather than past performance, when evaluating individuals (Bohnet, van Green, and Bazerman 2012). There is a rich sociological literature, however, that explores the circumstances under which norms and stereotypes change or resist revision in the face of contradictory evidence. Gender acts in combination with other group identities, for example, and the existence of a reference group can alter stereotypes (Ridgeway 2011). This suggests a rich landscape for interrogating unequal norms and stereotypes and the possibility of change, under the right conditions.

3. Conclusion

In sum, gender norms and stereotypes typically incorporate status beliefs that disadvantage women and privilege men's access to and control over resources, and therefore material well-being. They require little enforcement because individuals internalize these social rules, and incur a social cost if they violate norms. Gender norms and stereotypes are embedded in a wide variety of institutions. The media plays a significant role in inculcating stereotypes and perpetuating them. Legal institutions encode rules around property ownership, and labor markets slot men and women for jobs that are inequality in pay and status, reinforcing women's role as caretakers.

It is, however, possible to change norms and stereotypes as evidenced by the examples given in this paper. This can be done by explicitly addressing the rules and policies of key institutions, which requires a focused gender analysis to identify the policies that explicitly and implicitly reproduce gender unequal norms and stereotypes. Moreover, by promoting women's economic empowerment, in particular access to paid work, traditional norms and stereotypes are dislodged, as people update their attitudes in response to new information and the visibility of women in higher status roles and positions.

The growing focus on women's economic empowerment then can be a fulcrum for change. That said, backlash against changing norms and stereotypes is to be expected and occurs particularly frequently when improvements in women's well-being (such as access to jobs) comes at the perceived cost of male well-being (Braunstein 2008). There is, for example, evidence of increased domestic violence as male unemployment rises (Macmillan and Kruttschnitt 2004; Tertilt and van den Berg 2012). This makes it critical to scrutinize and reform legal and political institutions, including the functioning of public safety systems, to work on behalf of gender equality and to be cognizant of the resistance to change that is likely to occur.

At the same time, efforts to change norms of masculinity must be undertaken. To this end, policies that permit men to take on caring roles in their families without an economic penalty can be a major impetus for change. That will not be enough. An explicitly look and effort to alter the cultural, legal, political and economic factors that influence how we view manhood. Just as women are pressured to conform to limiting roles, so too are men.

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