

Stifled by Stigma? Experimental Effects of Updating Husbands' Beliefs on Participation in Women's Household Work

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Short abstract:

We empirically test whether correcting men's beliefs about their peer's acceptance about men doing women's work encourages men to take on more tasks (e.g. collecting firewood and laundry) traditionally assigned to women in rural Amhara, Ethiopia. While most men claim they believe it's acceptable for men to perform select women-specific tasks, they also significantly under-estimate the extent to which their peers are accepting due to longstanding gender norms that traditionally allocate the majority of household work to women. We share true peer beliefs about acceptability through a simple lab-in-the-field information experiment. Men who receive the information treatment are more likely to report privately after the session that they intend to perform the activity in the coming week. While we find some indication of a positive treatment effect on the likelihood that men perform the task over the following week, we find no evidence that women's total time spent on household work decreases among women whose husbands received the treatment.

Extended abstract:

Longstanding gender norms traditionally allocate the majority of household work to women in developed and developing countries alike. Among the rural poor, these women-specific tasks often include water and firewood or fuel collection, which can be very time consuming and physically demanding. At the same time, poverty alleviation programs increasingly encourage and train women to work in income-generating activities, putting additional demands on their time (Bandiera et al., 2020). Without a shift in the responsibility of household chores from women to other household members, women experience the double burden of work and housework. If household tasks are transferred to children who in turn study less, miss school, or drop out altogether, the gains from women's income generation may be offset by losses to human capital development. More equitable sharing of household tasks between spouses can help to alleviate women's double burden and protect children. However, even men who see the benefits of more equitable sharing of tasks may be unwilling to take on some tasks if they believe they would experience social sanctions from violating gender norms. If men are wrong and misperceive the likelihood of stigmatization or social sanction to be too high, a sub-optimal equilibrium of men's non-participation in chores results.

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In the presence of these misperceptions, can men's beliefs be updated, leading to changes in behavior? We conduct a simple information experiment among married men in rural Ethiopia to test whether these gender norms are malleable in response to uncovering their misperceptions. Specifically, we gather men participating in a multi-faceted livelihoods program with their wives in rural Amhara, Ethiopia. During a group activity which preserves men's anonymity, we elicit men's first and second order beliefs about the acceptability of their participation in specific household tasks traditionally assigned by norms to their wives. With a randomly selected treatment sub-group, we provide updates to these beliefs (following Bursztyn et al., 2020). We then follow up with their wives with detailed time use data collection for one week and measure whether exposure to the information treatment increases participation by men in shared household chores.

Preliminary results suggest that while most men accept men's performance of women-specific tasks, most men also significantly underestimate the extent to which their peers are accepting. Men who receive the information treatment that could update their beliefs about their peer's attitudes are more likely to report privately after the session that they intend to perform the activity in the coming week, when compared to their peers in the control group who did not receive the information. While we find some indication of a positive treatment effect on the likelihood that men perform the task over the following week, we find no evidence that women's total time spent on household work decreases among women whose husbands received the treatment.

Due to COVID-19 shutdowns that interrupted fieldwork during 2020, we are still collecting data from the field. With data collection slated to conclude in Fall 2021, we will be able to estimate treatment effects with more precision from the full sample. This randomized controlled trial is registered in the AEA RCT Registry and the unique identifying number is: "AEARCTR-0005961." Pre-analysis plan available on request. Principal investigators are Ellen McCullough (UGA) and Tamara McGavock (Grinnell College).

References

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- Bursztyn, L., Gonzalez, A. L., & Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2020). Misperceived Social Norms: Female Labor Force Participation in Saudi Arabia. *American Economic Review*, 110(10), 2997–3029.
- McCullough, Ellen and Tamara McGavock (principal investigators). 2020. "Her Time: a time use study of women participating in livelihoods programs in Ethiopia." AEA RCT Registry. June 04, 2020.