Social norms and female labor force participation in Bangladesh: The role of social expectations and reference networks

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Research Questions:

• Do people in Bangladesh adjust their personal support for working women when confronted with different degrees of support in the women's network? and

• Whose support has the greatest influence on personal support for working women?
Background:


- Following Bicchieri (2014), we approach social norms as relational and conditional.

- Personal preferences, and particularly their behavioral implications are conditional upon expectations about the values and behaviors of other members of one’s reference network. (Fehr & Schurtenberger 2018, Gächter et al. 2017)
This distinction between personal belief, behavior and social expectations is important from a theoretical as well as a policy perspective.

From theory perspective, a practice can be identified as a social norm only when personal belief as well as behavior is conditional upon social expectations. Otherwise, such practices could just be a religious belief, custom etc (Biccheiri 2014), and their remedies might be different.

From policy perspective, gender norms may in fact be less ingrained than often assumed. Rather than deep-seated preferences, they might partly reflect adjustment to more malleable perceptions of what is the current societal consensus (Bursztyn et al. 2020).
Target Group: NEET Female Youth

Who are NEET:
The share of youth who are neither in employment nor in education or training.\(^2\)

Why focus on NEET female?
- Young women are twice as likely as young men to have NEET status.
- Young female who are NEET are likely to remain out of labor force longer.
- Globally, one-fifth of young people currently have NEET status.\(^3\)
- In Bangladesh, 87% NEET youth are female (Labor Force Survey 2017).\(^4\)


\(^3\) Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020: Technology and the future of jobs by ILO;

To understand the constraints in context of Bangladesh, we conducted a phone survey interviewing:

- 482 NEET females
- 432 working females

As cost for breaking social norm is not equal for all household members (Bernhardt et al 2018), we also interviewed their traditional guardian (father/husband).

- 387 father/husband of NEET females
- 356 father/husband of unemployed females
What type of social expectations, if any, can change support for FLFP?

**VIGNETTE I:**

Following Bicchieri et al. (2014), we manipulated social expectation to understand the causal role of social norm.

Scenario I (Empirical expectation):
A situation in which a young *married/unmarried* girl is considering taking up a job. Most girls in her village *participate/do not participate* in a job outside home to earn an income.

Scenario II (Normative expectation):
A situation in which a young *married/unmarried* girl considers taking up a job. People in her village think that good girls *work/do not work* outside home for income.

**Respondents were asked only one randomly selected scenario.** Attributes are also randomly selected from each scenario. Attributes are underlined in the above scenarios.
What type of social expectations, if any, can change support for FLFP?

**VIGNETTE I:**

Based on one randomly selected scenario, respondents were asked to respond to below two questions on behavior and personal belief.

**Expected Behavior:** In your opinion, will the woman’s father/husband ultimately agree that his daughter/wife takes the job?

**Personal belief:** Do you think the father/father-in-law should agree to his daughter/daughter-in-law taking the job?
What type of social expectations, if any, can change support for FLFP?

- Social expectations do have an impact, especially on people’s expected support of the reference male.
- Vignettes including signals of social approval (as opposed to disapproval) increase the likelihood of expecting support from the reference male by 11 percentage points.
What type of social expectations, if any, can change support for FLFP?

- Personal support changes by 4 percentage points.
- Empirical social expectation have a stronger effect on expected behavior, but only when negative.
What type of social expectations, if any, can change support for FLFP?

- The lowest impact of social expectations can be found in personal beliefs of females, especially working females, who are not at all affected by any type of social expectation.

- NEET female and non-NEET males are also the two groups for which negative empirical social expectation have stronger negative impact than normative ones.
Findings From Vignette I

In sum, the effects of Vignette I suggest that -

• Views of female employment are malleable.
• Respondents clearly factor in cues from the social environment when deciding on whether to support employment of their daughters and wives.
• Respondents’ personal beliefs change, but the effect is significant only for male respondents.
• We find no systematic evidence that empirical or normative expectations differ in our context
WHOSE OPINION MATTERS?

VIGNETTE II:

Scenario I:
A young girl is planning to take up a job. Her father-husband/friends/religious authority and her father-husband/friends/religious authority approve/does not approve taking up the job.

Scenario II:
A young girl is planning to take up a job. Her father-husband/friends/religious authority approves, where as her father-husband/friends/religious authority does not approve taking up the job.

Respondents were asked two randomly selected scenarios. Attributes are also randomly selected from each scenario. Attributes are underlined in the above scenarios.
WHOSE OPINION MATTERS?

- Likelihood of supporting the girl’s employment increases by 30 percentage points (41% of the mean support) if the vignettes indicates father/husband approval.
- The effect of approval by religious authorities is roughly on the same level as the one by relatives and friends (both around ten percentage points).
WHOSE OPINION MATTERS?

- When the father/husband approves, the disapproval of either the peers or the religious authority decreases the average support of around 5%.
WHOSE OPINION MATTERS?

- This support decreases by around 26% if the father/husband does not approve, while the peers or the religious authority do.
WHOSE OPINION MATTERS?

- The approval from those two actors has basically the same effect in magnitude, and even when combined, they do not reach the effect of father/husband approval.
- Father/husband support, hence, seems to be sufficient for supporting the girl.
Job Characteristics and Motives

**VIGNETTE III:**

We manipulate income for self (vs household), minimum wage in the garments sector (vs 10% increase), and need to move outside village (vs do not need) to understand how such attributes impact FLFP rate.

**Scenario 1:**

A situation in which a young woman considers taking up a job to increase her own income/hh income, salary is 8,000 BDT/10,000 BDT and she will need to move/will not need to move outside her village.

**Respondents were asked one scenario randomly selecting the attributes.** Attributes are underlined in the above scenarios.
Job Characteristics and Motives

- Both, an increase in salary and the need for moving outside the village, are very important factors behind the support for female labor force participation.
- On average, a 25% salary increase leads to an 11 percentage point increase in the support for accepting the offer.
Job Characteristics and Motives

- The necessity to move outside decreases the support by 20 percentage point.
- We do not see any impact of motif.
Conclusion:

- Support for female labor force participation is malleable.
- Approval by reference male (father/husband) is more significant than the approval by religious authorities or peers.
- Need to leave the village is an important determinants of support for female labor force participation.
- Our results suggest that policies aiming to increase female youth employment should target social expectations in the population.
- Fathers or husbands should be central in such a strategy.
THANK YOU!