

Social Norms and Economic Behavior: Gender Norms, Perceptions, and their Impact

Leonardo Bursztyn

University of Chicago

May 2023

Social Norms and Economic Behavior

- ▶ Individuals' economic decisions are affected by their concerns about their social image.
- ▶ In a given society, social norms influence the social sanctions or rewards associated with certain behaviors or opinions, and thus shape social image concerns.

Related Literature

Work builds on:

- ▶ Economics theoretical literature on social signaling and pro-social behavior (e.g., Bénabou and Tirole, 2006, 2011) and on conformity (e.g., Bernheim, 1994)
- ▶ Economics lab and field experimental literature on social pressure (e.g., Andreoni and Bernheim, 2002; DellaVigna et al., 2012)
- ▶ Long psychology literature on social pressure and conformity (e.g., Asch, 1951, Milgram, 1963, Ross and Nisbett, 1991)
- ▶ Literature on social norms (e.g., Bicchieri, 2006, and Gelfand, 2018)

Identifying Social Image Concerns in the Field

Own work:

Ideally: manipulate visibility and cross-manipulate audience

- ▶ Peer pressure in education (QJE 2015, RESTUD 2019)
- ▶ Gender norms and labor market investments in the US (AER 2017)
- ▶ Status goods/conspicuous consumption (QJE 2018)
- ▶ (Related): Keeping up with the Joneses (Econometrica 2014, RESTUD 2022)
- ▶ Internalizing norms/morality (JPE 2019)
- ▶ Observability within the household (JPE 2012)
- ▶ The role of rationales in facilitating expression (QJE Forthcoming, RESTUD Forthcoming)
- ▶ Elections and changes in social norms (AER 2020)

Beliefs about Others and Social Norms

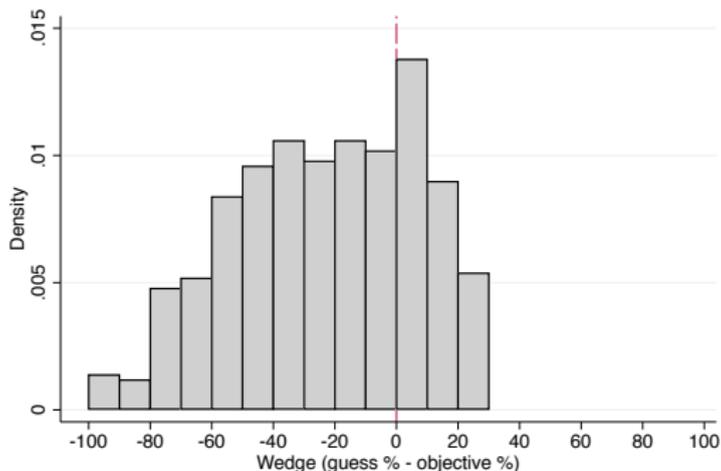
- ▶ People might have incorrect about others' views and these misperceptions can be reinforced
 - ▶ *Pluralistic ignorance* (Katz and Allport, 1931)
- ▶ Correcting beliefs might lead to change in social norm
- ▶ Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin “From Extreme to Mainstream: The Erosion of Social Norms” (AER 2020)
- ▶ Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott “Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia” (AER 2020)

Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott “Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia” (AER 2020)

- ▶ In non-democracies, pluralistic ignorance might be sustained for longer periods
- ▶ Consider opinions on whether women should be allowed to work outside the home
- ▶ Is Saudi Arabia experiencing pluralistic ignorance?
- ▶ If norms are misperceived, then does correcting beliefs affect labor supply behavior?
 - ▶ Indicator that social norms obstacle for WWOH in Saudi Arabia
 - ▶ But simple information provision can promote WWOH

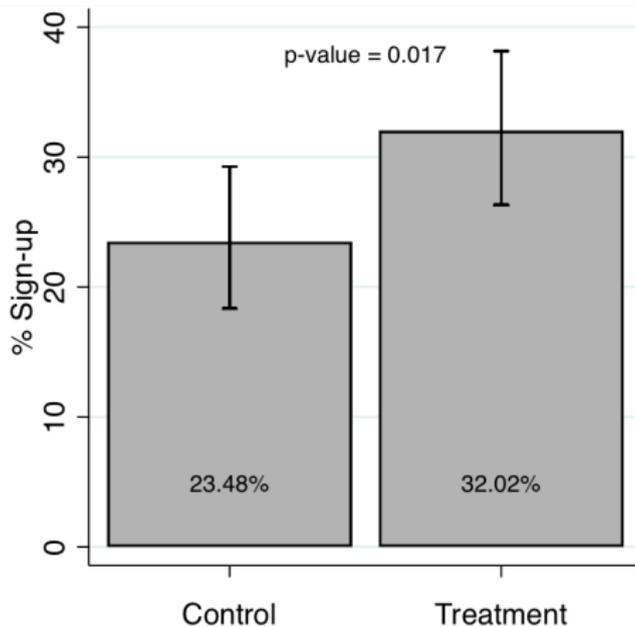
Results: Norms are Misperceived

Figure: Wedges in Perceptions of Others' Beliefs (Working Outside the Home)



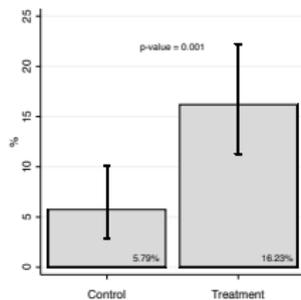
Notes: The distribution of wedges in perceptions about the beliefs of others regarding whether women should be able to work outside the home. Wedges calculated as (*the respondent's guess about the % of session participants agreeing with the statement*) - (*the true % of session participants agreeing with the statement*).

Results: Correcting Misperceptions Impacts Labor Supply Decisions

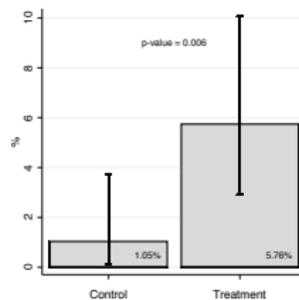


95% confidence intervals. p-value calculated from testing for equality of proportions.

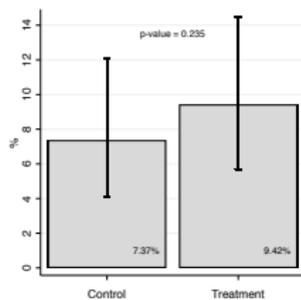
Longer-Term Impacts – Jobs Outside of Home



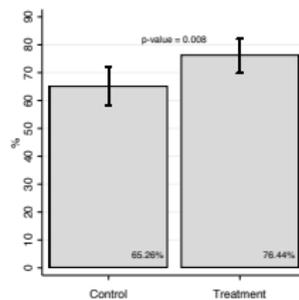
(a) Applied for Job



(b) Interviewed for Job



(c) Employed



(d) Driving Lessons

Online National Surveys and Additional Findings

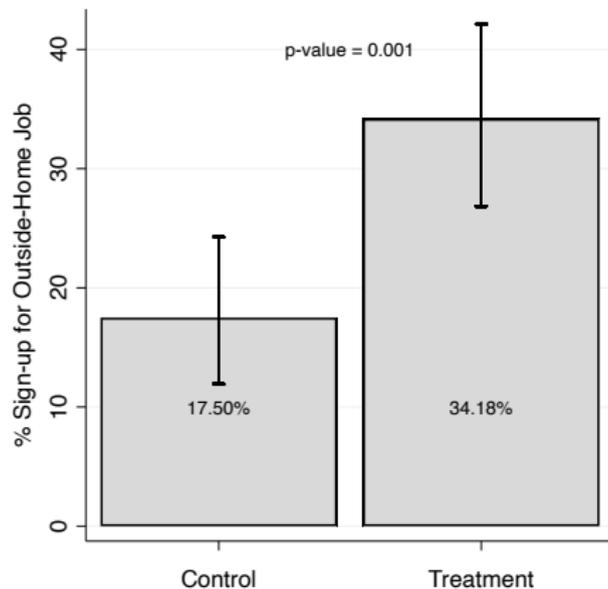
- ▶ Replication of misperception findings with two larger national surveys and dealing with social desirability bias with list experiment
- ▶ Similar level of support for WWOH in Arab Barometer (2010-11)
- ▶ Survey evidence suggestive of a potential driver of pluralistic ignorance: lack of discussion of topic strongly correlates with misperception

Recruitment Experiment

- ▶ Partnered with survey company: informing women about actual support for WWHO leads them to switch from at-home enumerator temporary job to higher-paying, outside-the-home version of the job

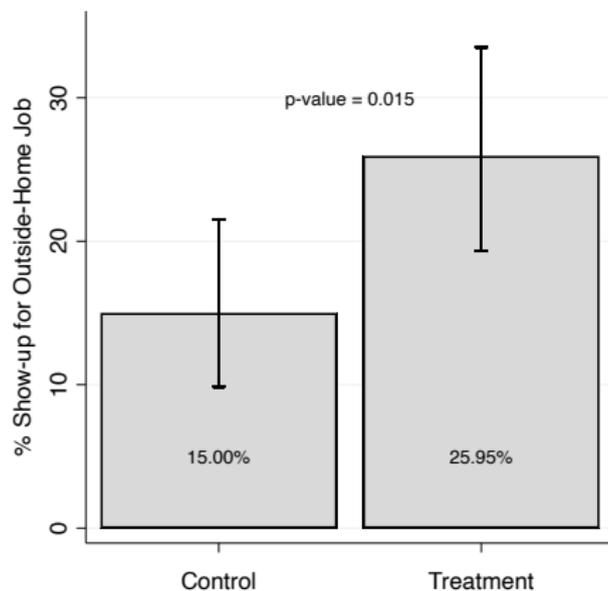
Recruitment Experiment: Results (1)

Figure: Share of Women Choosing Job Outside the Home



Recruitment Experiment: Results (2)

Figure: Share of Women Showing Up for Job Outside the Home



Is Saudi Arabia an anomaly?

Is Saudi Arabia an anomaly?

Let's take a global perspective

How can societies make progress towards equality?

1. Changing *actual* norms

- ▶ Actual norms are slow-moving
- ▶ May require deep interventions

Dhar, Jain and Jayachandran (2022)

2. Changing how existing norms are *perceived*

- ▶ Simple informational interventions
- ▶ Potentially fast changes in the societal equilibrium

“How Are Gender Norms Perceived?”

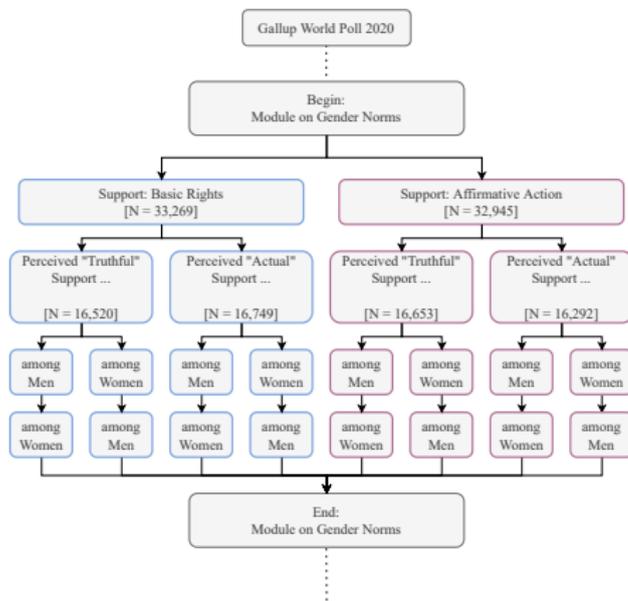
(Bursztyn, Cappelen, Tungodden, Voena, and Yanagizawa-Drott)

- ▶ Norms in two dimensions of gender policy:
 - ▶ **Basic rights**
Allowing women to work outside of their home
 - ▶ **Affirmative action**
Prioritizing women when hiring for leadership positions
- ▶ How are those norms perceived? Is there potential for change?

⇒ **Four stylized facts** about misperceptions of gender norms

- ▶ Mechanisms that can explain the patterns of misperceptions of gender norms across the world

Module in Gallup World Poll 2020



Randomized:

- ▶ Policy question
- ▶ "Truthful" vs. "Actual"
- ▶ Order of eliciting beliefs about support among men and women

Eliciting norms

- ▶ Basic Rights

Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. Women should have the freedom to work outside of the home.

- ▶ Affirmative action

Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. The government and companies should give priority to women when hiring for leadership positions.

Validation of Approach

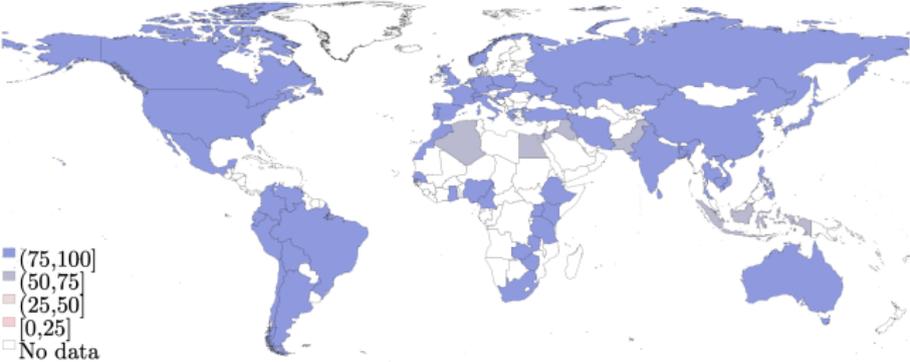
- ▶ General issues
 - ▶ Cognitive interviews; quality checks of translations; strict interview protocols
- ▶ Social desirability bias
 - ▶ Literature on misperceptions: Not just artefact of survey measurement issues [Bursztyn and Yang \(2022\)](#)
 - ▶ Treatment manipulation in survey (“actual” vs. “truthful” version): virtually no differences in levels of support
 - ▶ Elicitation methods with varying degree of cover find very similar levels of support

Relevance of national level perceptions

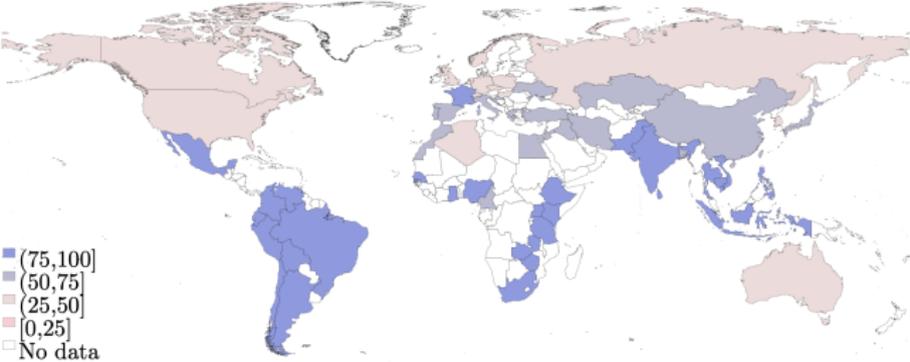
- ▶ Literature on social influence: Perceptions about local peers causally influence wide range of behavior
Bursztyn and Jensen (2017); Bursztyn, González and Yanagizawa-Drott (2020)
- ▶ Show in additional experiment that national level perceptions causally affect perceptions about gender norms in local peer groups

Global Patterns of Gender Norms

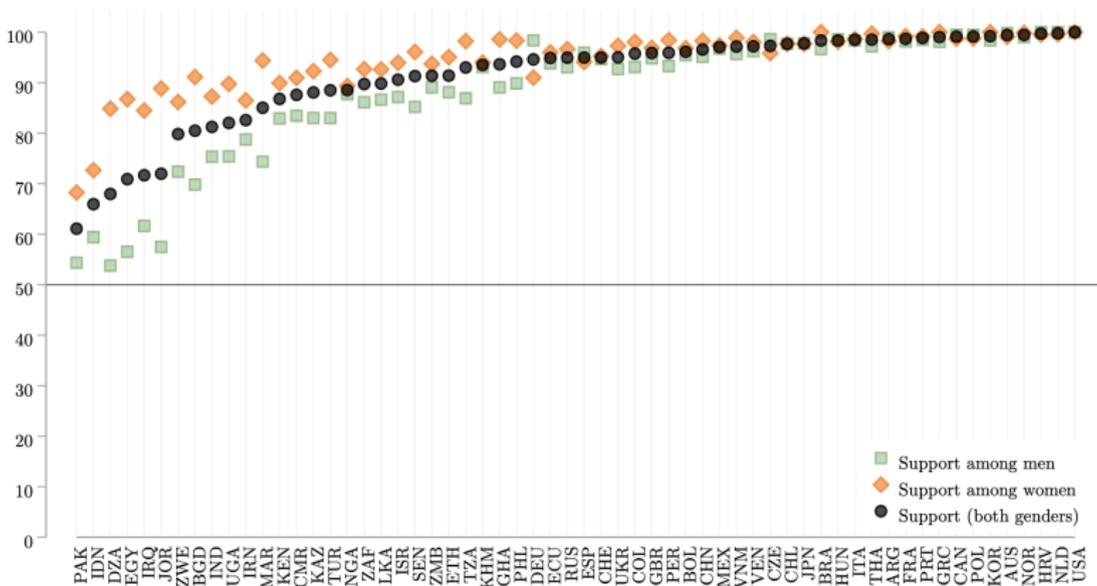
(a) Basic rights



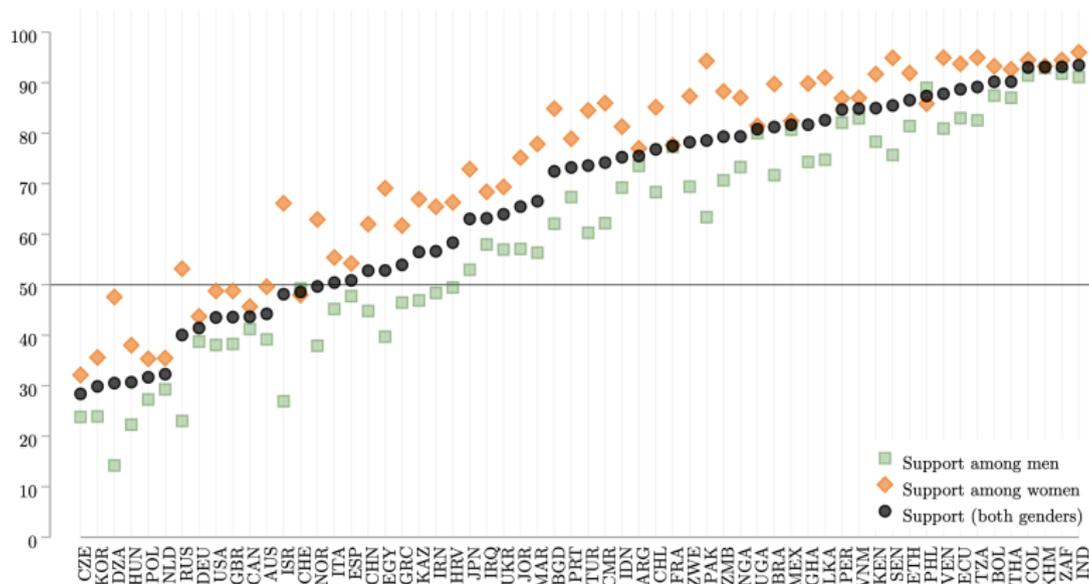
(b) Affirmative action



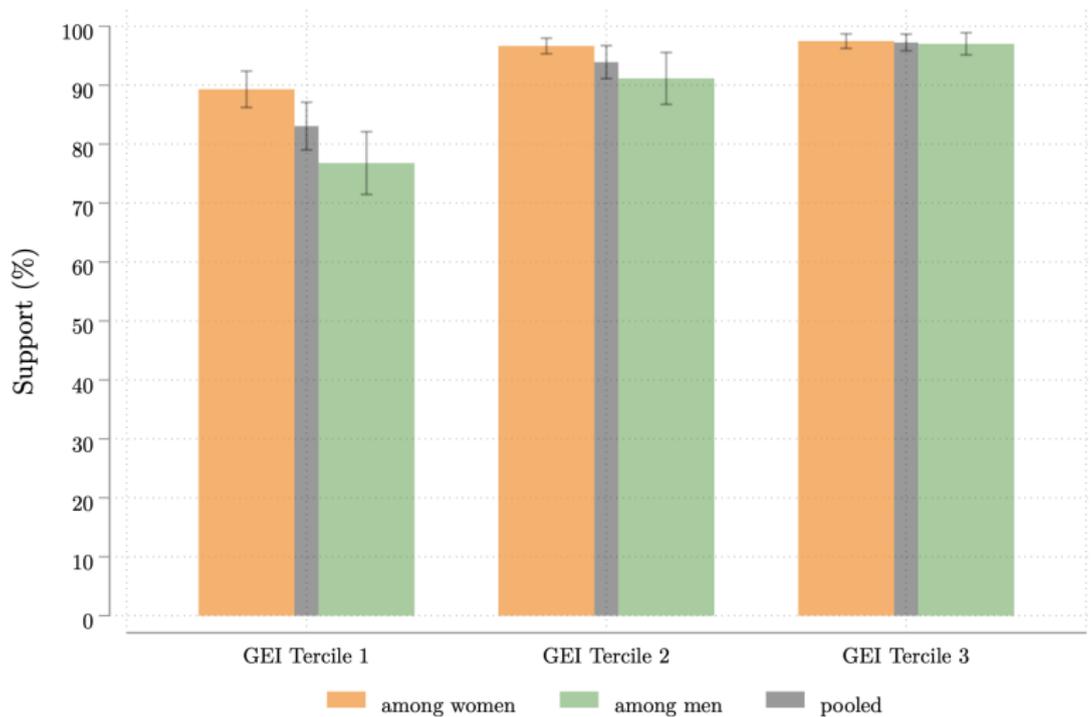
Global Patterns of Gender Norms: Basic rights



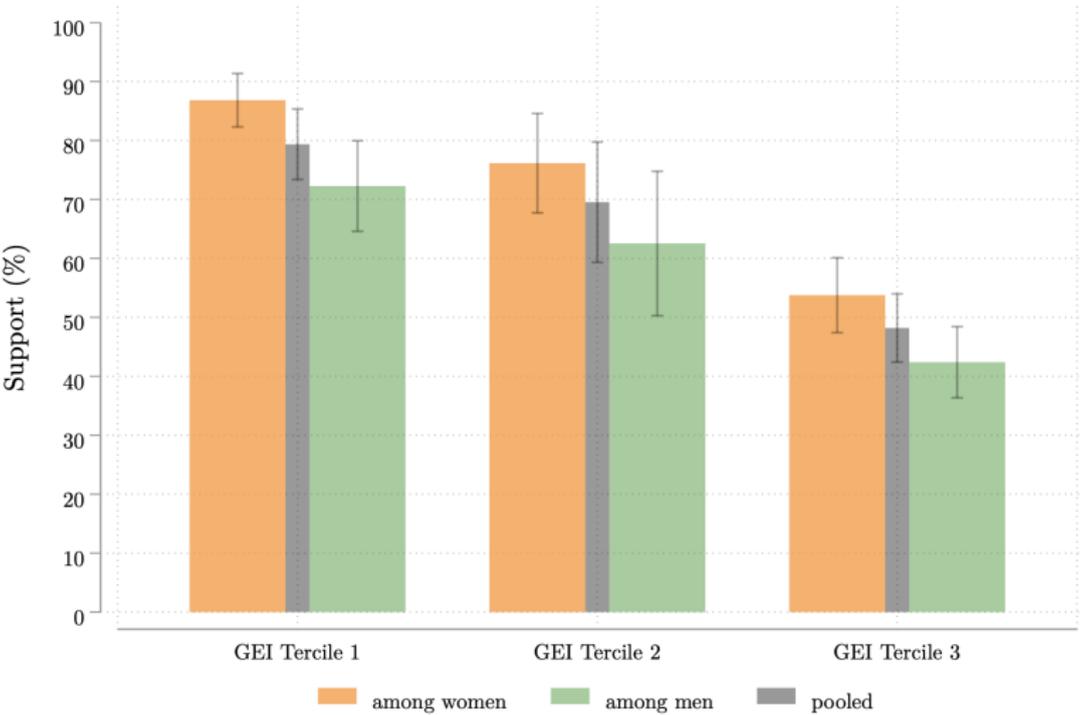
Global Patterns of Gender Norms: Affirmative action



Support by Gender Equality Index and Gender: Basic rights

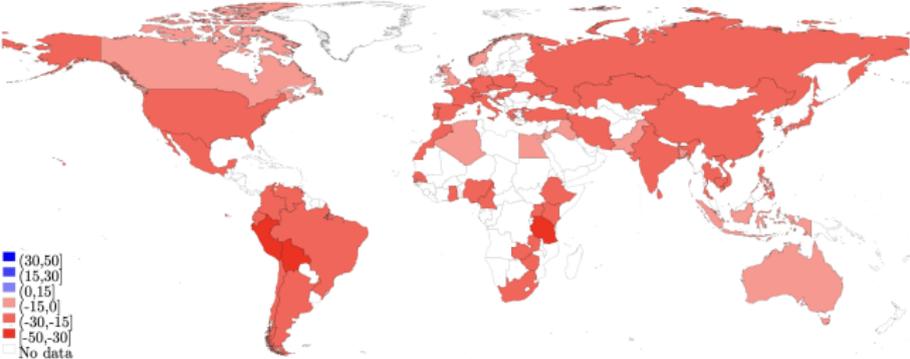


Support by Gender Equality Index and Gender: Affirmative action

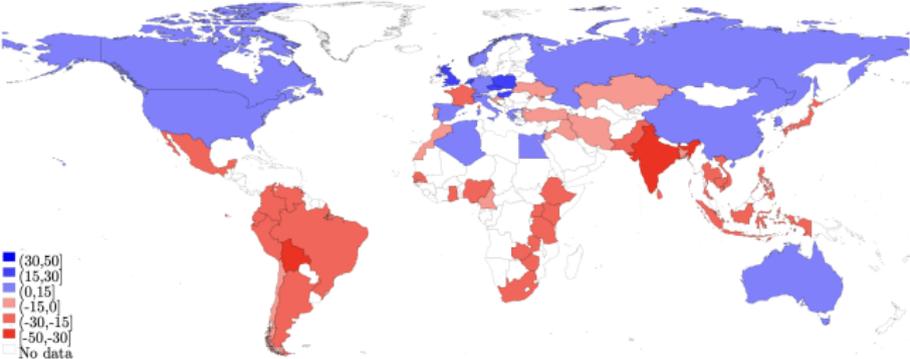


Misperceived Gender Norms

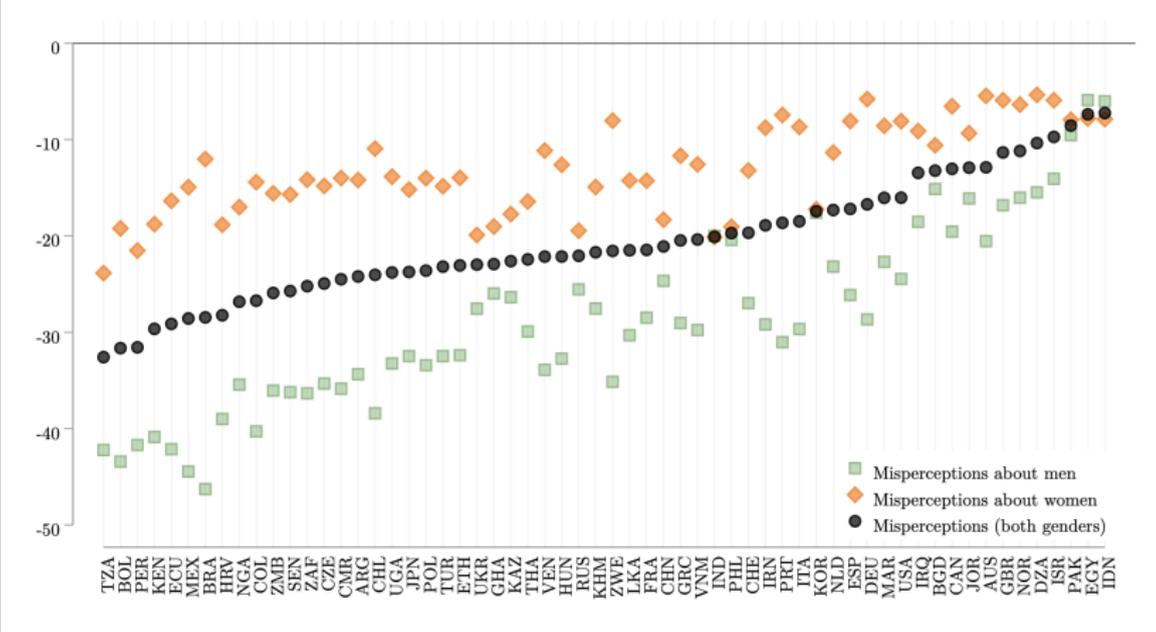
(a) Basic rights



(b) Affirmative action

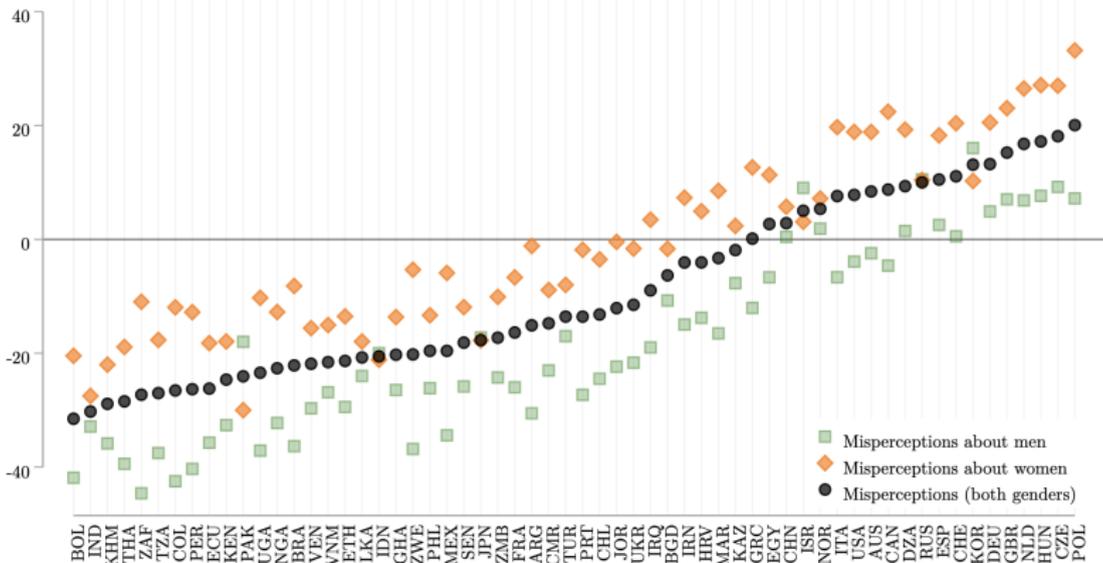


Misperceived Gender Norms: Basic rights



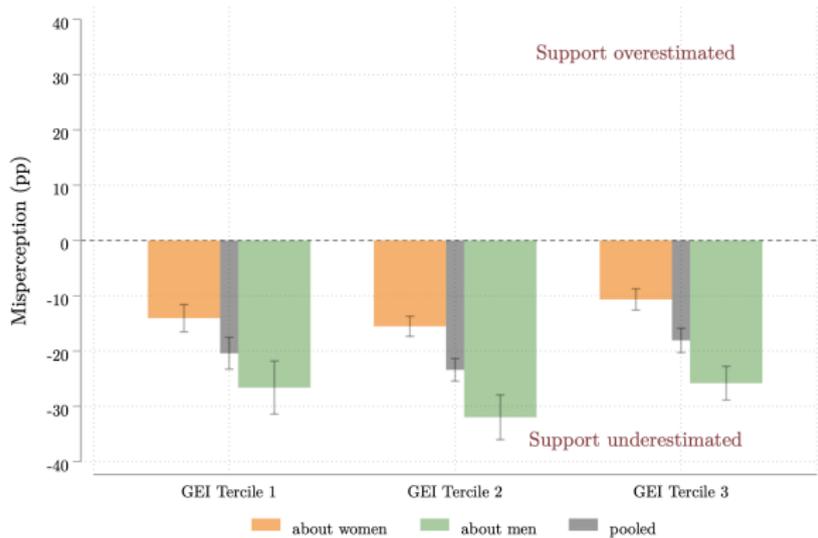
► Support for basic rights for women is universally underestimated - in all countries and for both genders

Misperceived Gender Norms: Affirmative action



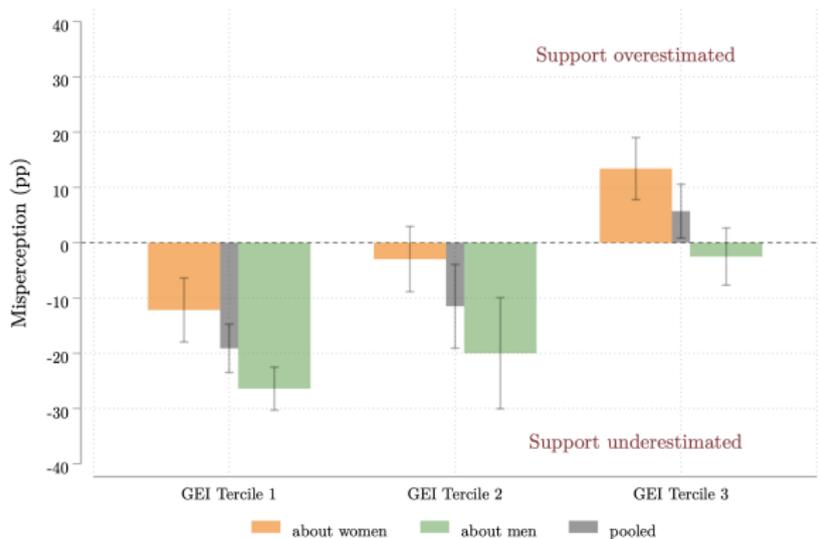
- ▶ Support for affirmative action for women is underestimated in the majority of countries, but overestimated in a minority of countries
- ▶ Women's support for affirmative action is overestimated in a number of countries

Misperceived Gender Norms: Basic rights



- ▶ Stable pattern across the spectrum of gender equality

Misperceived Gender Norms: Affirmative action



- ▶ Underestimation of support in less gender-equal countries
⇒ driven primarily by underestimation of men's support
- ▶ Overestimation of support in more gender-equal countries
⇒ driven by overestimation of women's support

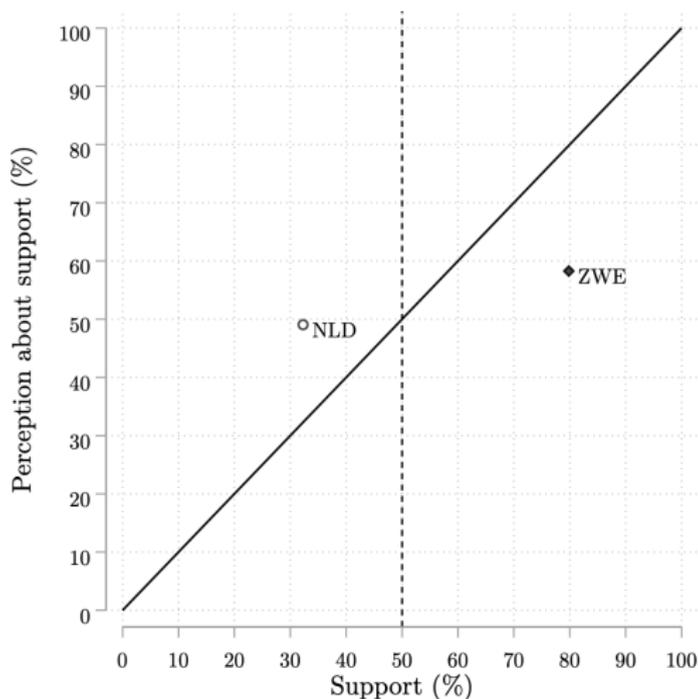
Four Stylized Facts

1. Support for **basic rights** for women is universally underestimated.
2. Men's support for **basic rights** for women is more underestimated than women's support.
3. Support for **affirmative action** for women is underestimated in low gender equality countries and overestimated in high gender equality countries.
4. Men's support for **affirmative action** for women is more underestimated than women's support in almost all countries. In low gender equality countries, both men's and women's support are underestimated, while women's support is overestimated and men's support is not misperceived in high gender equality countries.

Understanding the global patterns

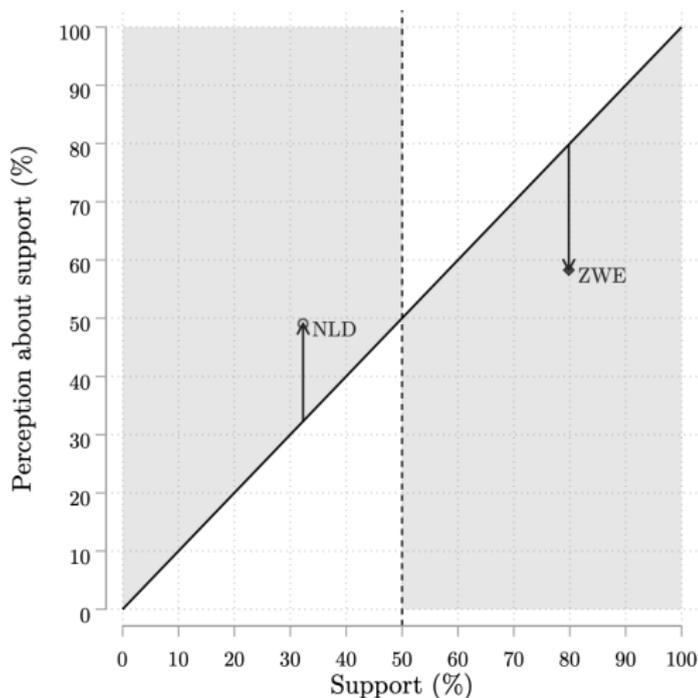
Example:

- ▶ Zimbabwe (GEI 1), *basic rights*
- ▶ The Netherlands (GEI 3), *affirmative action*



Gray area: Minority overweighting

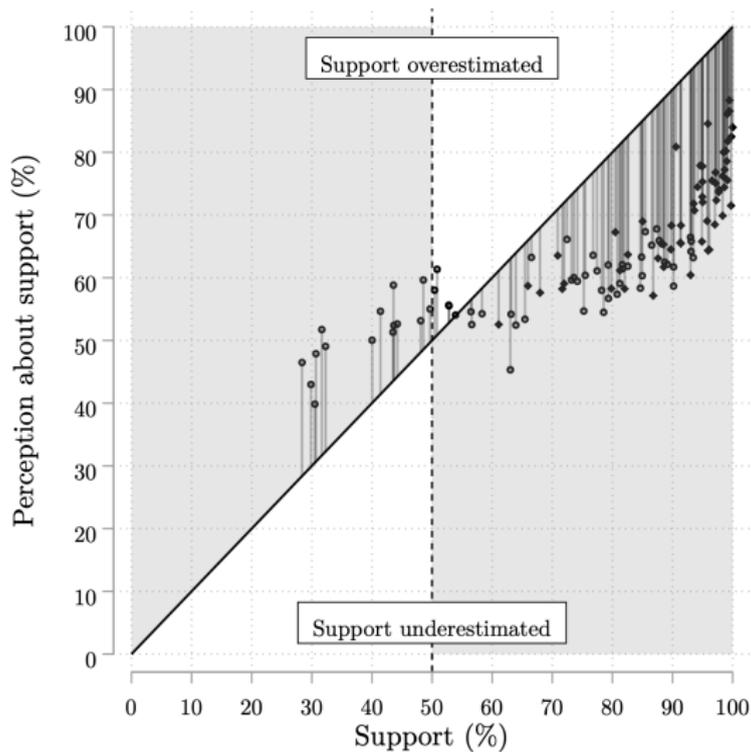
- ▶ Support < 50%
→ overestimation
 - ▶ Support > 50%
→ under-estimation
- ⇒ overweighting of minority position (gray area)



Reasons why people might overweight minority position

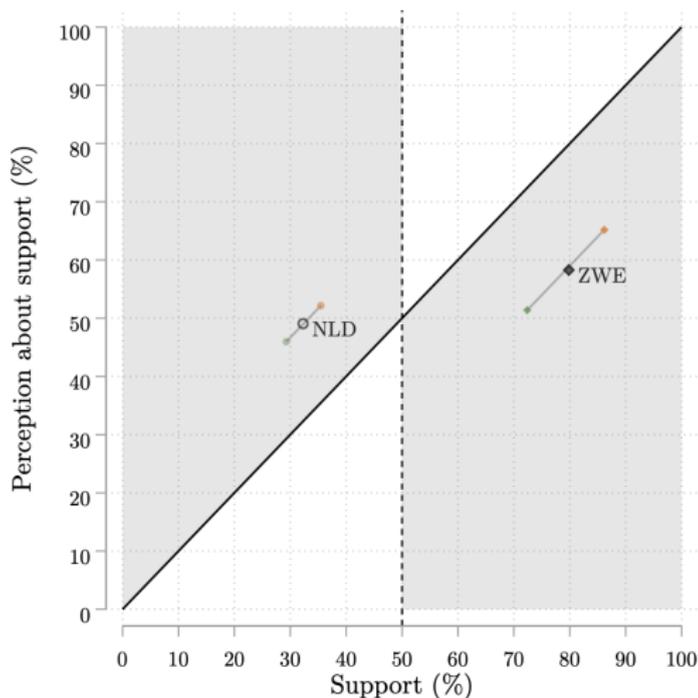
- ▶ Perceptions might be based on an outdated true state of the world, where support used to be different from what it is today, due to some country-level shock or trends
- ▶ Minority may get disproportionate (e.g., equal) media coverage (while agents cannot fully discount that)
- ▶ Activities of vocal minorities (e.g., protests by religious groups) could be very salient and capture the attention of the general population and inflate the perception about the size of the minority group
- ▶ Same pattern would arise if misperceptions are driven by a group of cognitive phenomena, such as “inattention,” “conservatism,” or base rate “insensitivity,” where beliefs tend to be anchored or driven towards the center.¹

Data: Minority overweighting is essentially universal



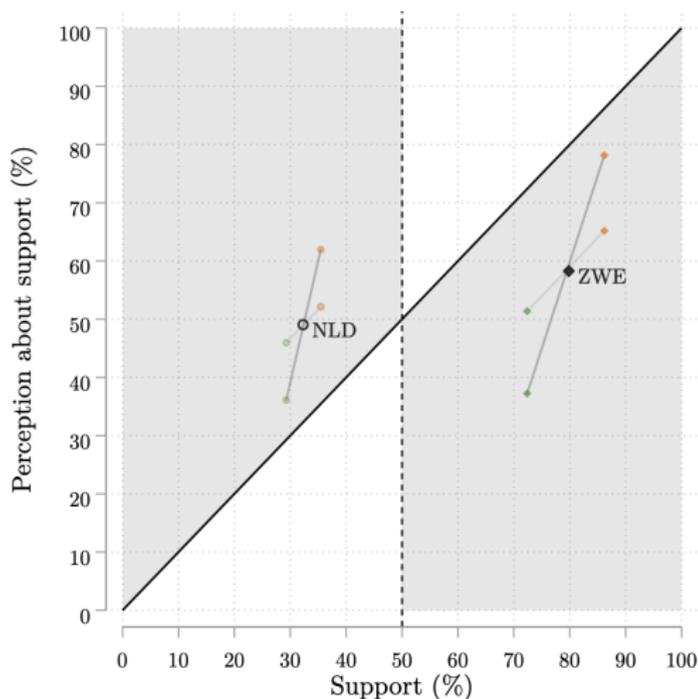
Perceptions about men/women under uniform minority overweighting

- ▶ Difference in support between men and women accurately perceived
- ⇒ Proportional adjustment



Data: Perceptions about men/women

- ▶ Positive adjustment in perception of women
 - ▶ Negative adjustment in perception of men
 - ▶ Difference in support between men and women exaggerated
- ⇒ Consistent with logic of *gender stereotyping*

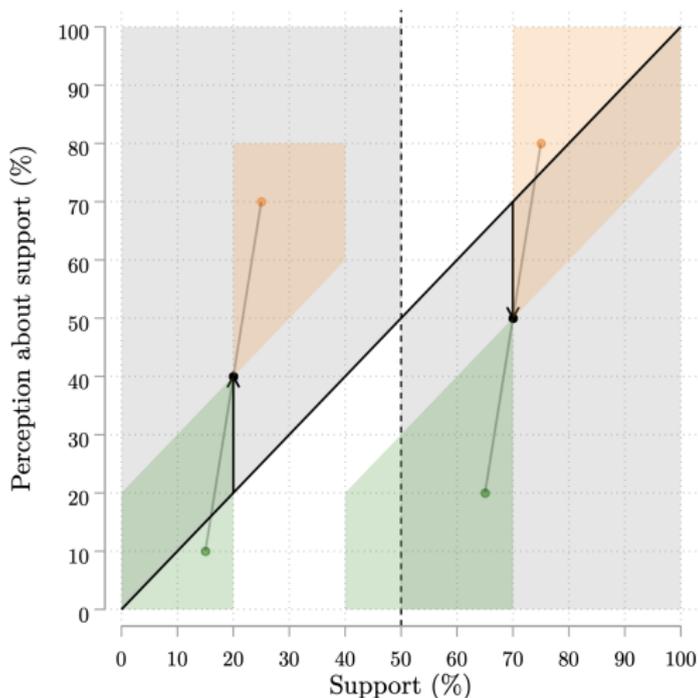


Reasons why people might stereotype based on gender

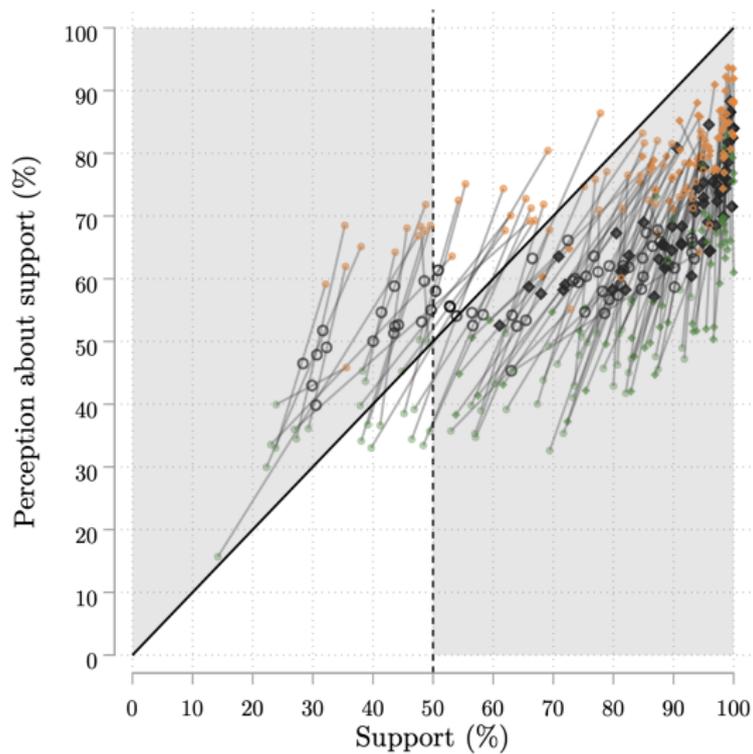
- ▶ Information itself can be imperfect: Women could be disproportionately portrayed as being in support of gender equality whereas men are disproportionately displayed as being against it.
 - ▶ in mass media
 - ▶ in the entertainment industry
- ▶ Political representation across genders or the expression of public opinions among their vocal leaders may not reflect the average position across genders in the population

Expectation under gender stereotyping

- ▶ Data: support among women is typically higher than support among men
- ▶ If gender stereotyping pervasive:
 - ▶ Orange area: women
 - ▶ Green area: men

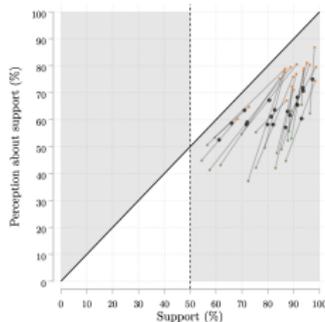


Jointly: Data

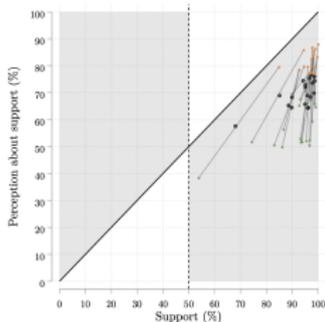


Interpretation: Facts about Basic Rights

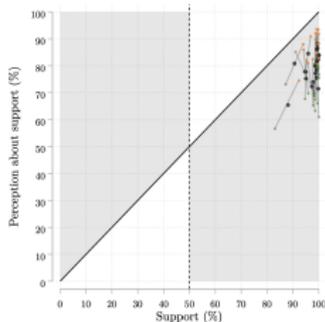
GEI Tercile 1



GEI Tercile 2



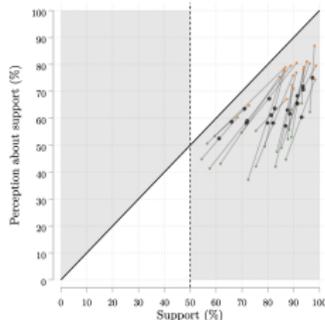
GEI Tercile 3



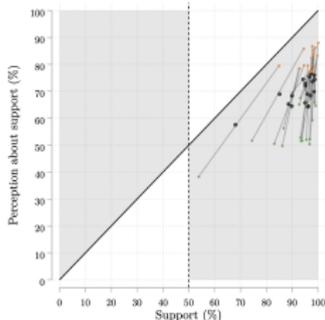
- ▶ **Fact #1:** Support for basic rights for women is universally underestimated for all countries and both genders.
- ▶ **Interpretation:** The minority view is against the policy everywhere, **minority overweighting** pushes perceptions below truth in all countries. The presence of gender stereotypes tend to push perceptions of women up, but not enough to outweigh the minority overweighting.

Interpretation: Facts about Basic Rights

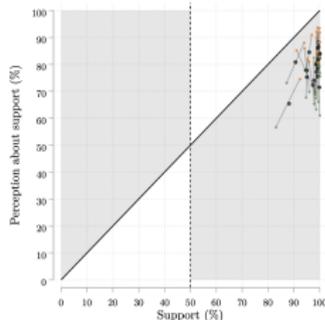
GEI Tercile 1



GEI Tercile 2



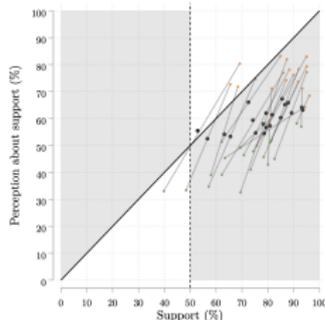
GEI Tercile 3



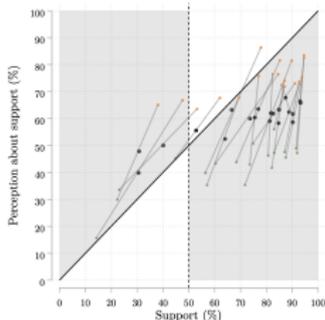
- ▶ **Fact #2:** Men's support for basic rights for women is more underestimated than women's support.
- ▶ **Interpretation:** The presence of **gender stereotyping** pushes perceptions about men down relative to perceptions about women. (Still, minority overweighting everywhere drives support among women to be underestimated.)

Interpretation: Facts about Affirmative Action

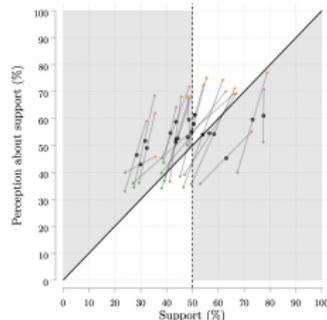
GEI Tercile 1



GEI Tercile 2



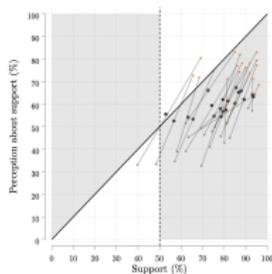
GEI Tercile 3



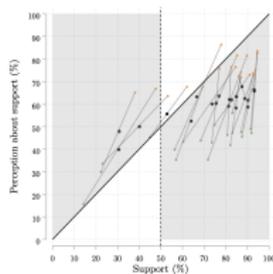
- ▶ **Fact #3:** Support for affirmative action for women is underestimated in low gender equality countries and overestimated in high gender equality countries.
- ▶ **Interpretation:** In GEI-1, the minority view is always against the policy, and so **minority overweighting** pushes perceptions below the actual support. In GEI-3, the minority view tends to be in favor of the policy, pushing perceptions above actual support.

Interpretation: Facts about Affirmative Action

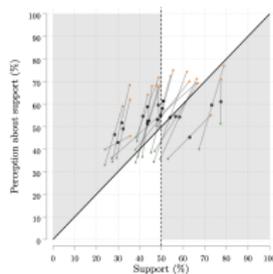
GEI Tercile 1



GEI Tercile 2



GEI Tercile 3



- ▶ **Fact #4:** Men's support for affirmative action for women is more underestimated than women's support in almost all countries. In low GEI countries, both men's and women's support are underestimated, while women's support is overestimated and men's support is not misperceived in high GEI countries.
- ▶ **Interpretation:** The two forces drive perceptions in different directions. In GEI-1, **minority weighting** pushing perceptions sufficiently down for both genders, despite **gender stereotyping**. In GEI-3, both forces push beliefs about support among women up, but for men in opposite directions with a net zero effect.

“How Are Gender Norms Perceived?”

Recap + Concluding Remarks

- ▶ Significant misperceptions of gender norms around the world
 - ▶ Observed in very different policy contexts - basic rights, affirmative action - and across the gender equality spectrum
 - ▶ Correcting misperceptions could potentially be used as policy tool
- ▶ Can reconcile the patterns with two forces: minority view overweighting and gender stereotyping
- ▶ Misperceptions exacerbates gender conflicts and shape perceptions of local reference groups

How Common are Misperceptions?

“Misperceptions about Others” (ARE 2022) review paper,
meta-analysis (with David Yang)

How Common are Misperceptions?

“Misperceptions about Others” (ARE 2022) review paper, meta-analysis (with David Yang)

- ▶ Misperceptions about others are:

How Common are Misperceptions?

“Misperceptions about Others” (ARE 2022) review paper, meta-analysis (with David Yang)

- ▶ Misperceptions about others are:
 1. Widespread
 2. Very asymmetric
 3. Misperceptions regarding in-groups are substantially smaller than those regarding out-groups

How Common are Misperceptions?

“Misperceptions about Others” (ARE 2022) review paper, meta-analysis (with David Yang)

- ▶ Misperceptions about others are:
 1. Widespread
 2. Very asymmetric
 3. Misperceptions regarding in-groups are substantially smaller than those regarding out-groups

- ▶ Three patterns on the effects of re-calibrating misperceptions:
 1. Experimental treatments generally work
 2. Qualitative/narrative treatments tend to have larger effects
 3. Larger changes in behaviors often only occur immediately after the interventions

Thank you!