



Research Insights

Changing gender norms around women's work: Evidence from an online intervention in Indonesia

Does providing information on the extent of community support for working women change husbands' and wives' attitudes?

Gender norms are a major barrier to women working

Gender norms hinder women's opportunities, choices and achievements across the globe.¹ These norms emphasise the role of married women as caregivers, imposing a barrier to women's increased labour force participation.

In Indonesia, social norms are conservative: 43% of Indonesian men report they prefer women to stay at home. This is as conservative as Saudi Arabia and more conservative than India where 30% of men agree.² Moreover, these norms are becoming more conservative. According to the 2018 World Values Survey, 76% of Indonesian men and 74% of Indonesian women agree with the statement "men have more right to a job than women", up significantly from 65% of men and 42% of women in 2006.³

This trend towards conservatism in Indonesia is in contrast with decreases in conservatism witnessed in many other countries. Given the importance of social norms in influencing behaviour and limiting gender equality, it is surprising that the evidence on how to positively influence such norms remains very thin.

We conducted an online survey to measure the extent of support for women with children working outside the home for pay. In a second survey we then investigated whether the provision of information regarding the level of community support for women working and husbands and wives sharing childcare can help increase support for women's labour force participation.

¹ Alesina et al., 2013; Fernandez 2013; Bertrand et al., 2015; and Jayachandran, 2021.

² For comparison, only 16% of Australian men hold this view.

³ Only 7% of Australians (both men and women) hold this view.

Key Insights

1 There is more support for wives working outside the home than what both men and women believe

Support for married women with children under the age of 12 working for pay outside the home is relatively high in Indonesia, with 76% of women reporting being supportive. However, women estimated that only 67% of women are supportive, and men underestimated the level of support by 17%, believing that only 59% of women are supportive.

2 There's also more support for husbands and wives sharing day-to-day childcaring...

90% of men reported being supportive of husbands sharing the day-to-day childcaring duties with their wives, such as feeding, bathing, dressing the child etc. However, both men and women underestimated this level of support by about 25%. Sharing these activities with men gives women the opportunity to work.

3 ... and more support again among mothers and mothers-in-law for daughters and daughters-in-law working

More than 80% of Indonesian men and women reported that their mothers' and mothers-in-law's opinions are important to them when deciding whether they (for women) or their wife (for men) works. And mothers and mothers-in-law are the groups most often cited as being unsupportive of wives working, more so than religious and other social groups. Mothers and mothers-in-law are thus 'powerholders' of gender norms in Indonesia, as in India and many Asian countries. However, data suggests that older women in Indonesia are in fact often more tolerant of women working than the younger generation.

4 Learning about the true level of support in the community can change gender attitudes and behaviour

Male and female respondents to an online survey were randomly allocated to four groups: three treatment groups that received some combination of information on levels of support for women working, for shared childcare and support from mothers and mothers-in-law (Figures 1a, 1b, 1c), and a control group that received no information. At the end of the survey, and after the information had been presented to the treatment group participants, participants were asked whether they wanted to receive an online career mentoring course with HR professionals which provides women (the respondent or their wife) with practical career advice, or a shopping voucher of the same value. Men and women in the treatment groups were 25% more likely to choose the career mentoring voucher, which is taken as evidence that the information on the level of community support resulted in greater support for women working.

Figure 1a: Information given to Group 1, with xx% denoting the percentage reported by the respondent

In a previous question, we asked you to estimate how many out of 100 Indonesian women (with an education level similar to yourself) support wives with children under 12 working for pay outside the home.

Your estimate: xx% of women are supportive.

We surveyed married women with children with similar education level as you across urban Indonesia to assess their support for wives with children under 12 working for pay outside the home and found that:

Survey result: 76%* of women are supportive.

*This information is from an online survey conducted by the authors.

Figure 1b: Group 2 was given the information provided in Figure 1a as well as the following information, with xx% denoting the percentage the respondent reported

You were also previously asked to indicate how many out of 100 Indonesian men (with an education level similar to your husband) support husbands sharing day-to-day childcare responsibilities with their wives.

Your estimate: xx% of husbands are supportive.

We surveyed married men with children with a similar education to your husband across urban Indonesia to assess their support for husbands sharing childcare duties.

Survey result: 90%* of husbands are supportive.

*This information is from an online survey conducted by the authors.

Figure 1c: Group 3 was given the information provided in Figure 1a, Figure 1b and the following information, with xx% denoting the percentage the respondent reported

Many parents of young children are concerned about their mothers and mothers-in-law not supporting if women work for pay outside the home.

Above you were asked to estimate how many women in your mother's generation would agree with the statement: "when a woman works her children suffer".

Your estimate: xx% of women of your mother's generation agree.

A representative survey of Indonesian women found that your mother and mother-in-law's generation are actually quite supportive of women with young children working for pay outside the home.

Survey result: Less than 10%* of women in your mother's generation agree.

* This information is from the 2018 Indonesian World Values Survey.

5 There was little heterogeneity in reactions to the information, although some possible differences between men and women

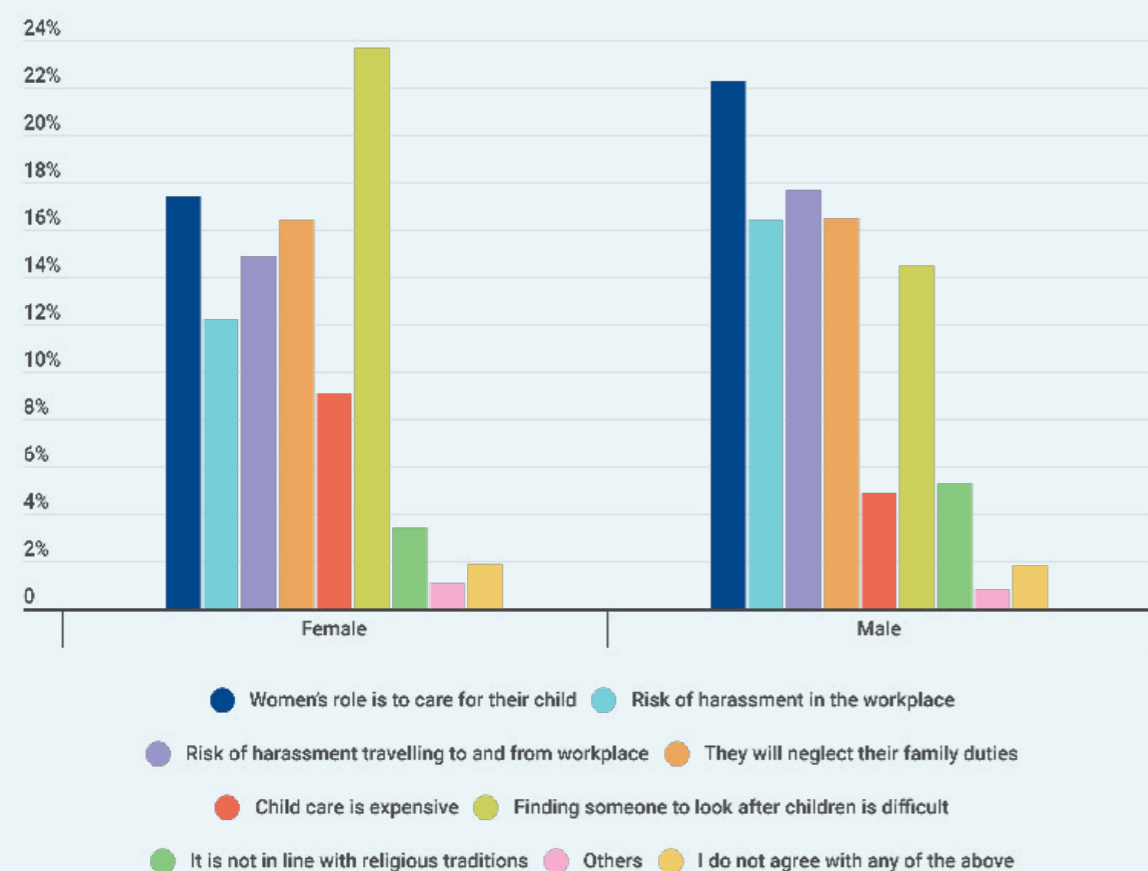
Those with larger misperceptions were not more greatly affected by the revelation of the high level of support in the community than others. There is some evidence, however, to suggest that men were more influenced by the views of other men (on childcare sharing) and that women were more swayed by the information on the level of support among women in their mothers' and mothers-in-law's generation.

The general message is that providing information on high levels of community support for women with children working and associated activities, eg childcare, is effective in changing gender norms.

Providing information on the level of community support for a behaviour can sway social norms in favour of that behaviour

Highlighting the level of community support for a behaviour can change social norms. Our intervention was particularly effective among men whose wives were not working. Changing men's attitudes is important as they are often the decisionmakers in this domain; 20% of women reported that they were not working because their husbands did not want them to, and the main reason men give for not supporting women working is that women's role is to care for children (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Main reasons not to support women working, as reported by respondents



We estimate that Indonesian female labour force participation could increase by as much as 6 percentage points (more than 10%) through interventions such as this.⁴ This is significant in a context where labour force participation has been stuck at around 50% for the last three decades.⁵

While more policy action is required in accompanying areas such as childcare, our research has demonstrated that light touch, low cost and easy scalable interventions like ours, or similar public information campaigns that reveal community support for women working, can change attitudes and improve women's opportunities in Indonesia, and likely elsewhere.

⁴ Assuming the same relationship between the increase in support for women working and women's future labour force participation as found in Bursztyn et al. (2020) who conducted a similar intervention in Saudi Arabia and who were able to identify the impacts on job applications and interviews 3 to 5 months later.

⁵ For more information see Cameron et al (2019).

Further Information

A translated version of this Research Insight is available in [Bahasa Indonesia](#).

Datasets:

We conducted two online surveys in 2022 using Qualtrics panels. The sample were men (50%) and women (50%), living in a metropolitan area, married, aged 18-40 years, living with their partner, with dependent children and with at least junior secondary education (75% secondary, 25% tertiary). The first survey had a sample size of 1,050 and the second survey a sample of 4,478.

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Further Reading

Cameron, L., Contreras Suárez, D. and D. Setyonaluri (2023), "Swaying Gender Norms Around Women's Work: Evidence from an Online Intervention in Indonesia", upcoming Working Paper, University of Melbourne.

References:

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Funding from JPAL-SEA's Indonesia Research Fund and the World Bank. Ethics approval 2022-23161-28577-5 at University of Melbourne and 014/UN2.F6.D2.LPM/PPM. KEP/2022 at Universitas Indonesia.

