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How are gender-role attitudes and attitudes toward work formed? Lesson from the rise and fall of the Iron Curtain

Gender differences in attitudes toward work and gender-role attitudes are important determinants of gender inequality in the labor market. In this brief we show that these attitudes vary considerably across countries and can also change within the same country over a relatively short time period. We then present evidence that politico-economic regimes that make substantial effort to bring women into the labor market can shape these attitudes: gender differences in attitudes toward work decrease, and gender-role attitudes become less traditional. Cultural norms with long historical roots are not necessarily invariant to large shocks, and policies aimed at raising women's presence in the labor market can activate virtuous cycles of increasing female employment.



Gender inequality and cultural attitudes

Levels of gender inequality in the labor market differ considerably worldwide, even among countries at similar levels of economic development. Policies, technology, and economic conditions have long been shown to play an important role in explaining cross-country and regional differences in gender inequality. More recently, researchers have emphasized the role of cultural attitudes, such as women's attitudes toward work and gender role attitudes (i.e. the beliefs that individuals hold regarding the appropriate roles of men and women in societies). Fortin (2008), for instance, finds that gender differences in attitudes towards work account for part of the existing gender wage gap in the US. Further, Fernández et al. (2004) show that differences in gender-role attitudes partly explain existing variation in female labor force participation. Given that gender differences in attitudes toward work and gender-role attitudes contribute to explain gender inequality in the labor market, economists have recently started studying the origins of these attitudes and their sources of variation over time.

In this policy brief we first document variation across space and over time in gender differences in attitudes toward work and gender-role attitudes; then, we present evidence that politico-economic regimes that put emphasis on women's inclusion in the labor market can shape these attitudes.

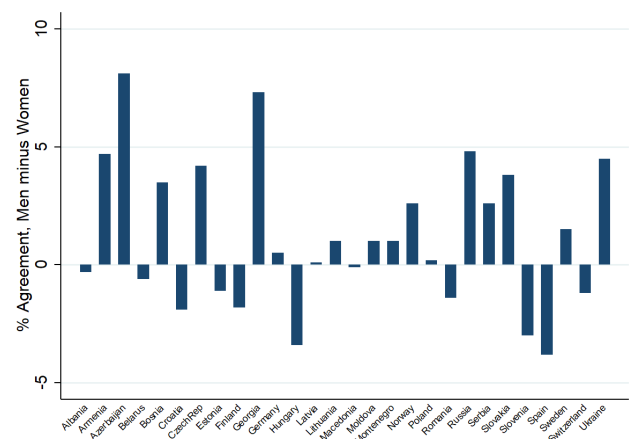
Gender-role attitudes and attitudes toward work across space and over time

The World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2014) asks questions, among others, about the importance of work in one's life, and about one's beliefs on the appropriate roles for women and men in society.

Based on these questions, we measure gender differences in the importance given to work, and levels of agreement with statements regarding gender roles. Below we show that such measures vary considerably among a sample of countries in Europe and Central-Asia, as well as within countries over time.

Figure 1 shows gender differences in the percentage of survey respondents who reported that work was *very important* or *rather important* to them in the survey wave of 1995-1998. There is substantial cross-country variation in whether men or women give more importance to work, and in the magnitude of the gender difference. Moreover, the underlying variation across women is larger than across men (data not shown): the minimum and maximum values among men are 84% (in Georgia) and 97.5% (in Bosnia), whereas the respective values for women are 77% (in Georgia) and 96.6% (in Macedonia).

Figure 1. Gender differences in attitudes toward work



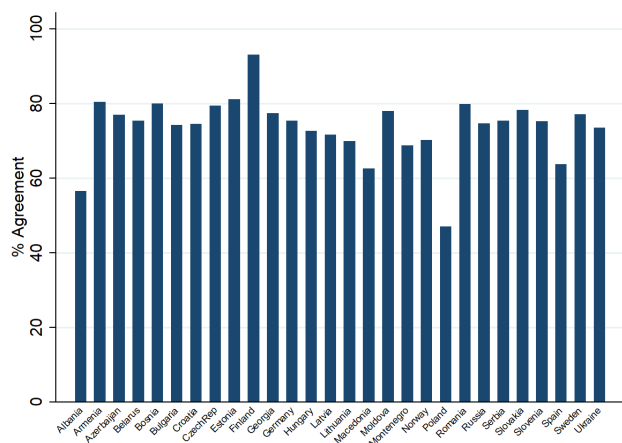
Source: Data are from the 1995-1998 wave of the World Values Survey. Individuals are asked the following question: *Please say, for each of the following, how important is work in your life*, and the options given are *Very important*, *Rather important*, *Not very important*, *Not at all important*. Countries selected are those in Europe and Central Asia where the question was asked in the 1995-1998 wave.

Figures 2 and 3 show variation across countries in gender role attitudes. The share of respondents who agree with the statement “*A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship*



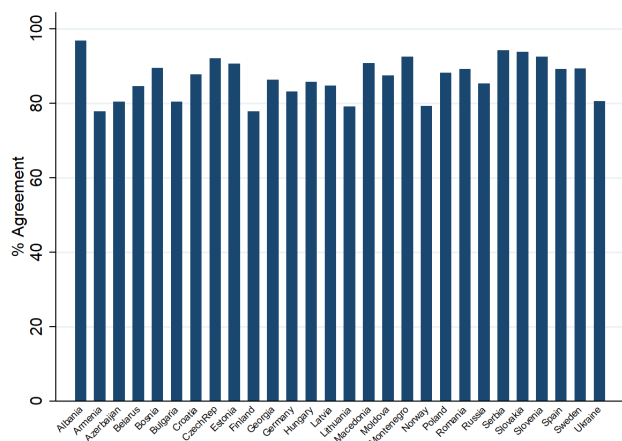
with her children as a mother who does not work “varies from a minimum of 47% in Poland to a maximum of 93% in Finland. The share of respondents who agree with the statement “Both the husband and wife should contribute to household income” varies from a minimum of 78% in Armenia and Finland to a maximum of 98% in Albania.

Figure 2. Working mother: warm relationship with her children.



Source: Data are from the 1995-1998 wave of the World Values Survey. Individuals are asked the following question: *People talk about the changing roles of men and women today. For each of the following statements I read out, can you tell me how much you agree with each?. Do you agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly? A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.* Countries selected are those in Europe and Central Asia where the question was asked in the 1995-1998 wave.

Figure 3. Husband and wife should both contribute to income.

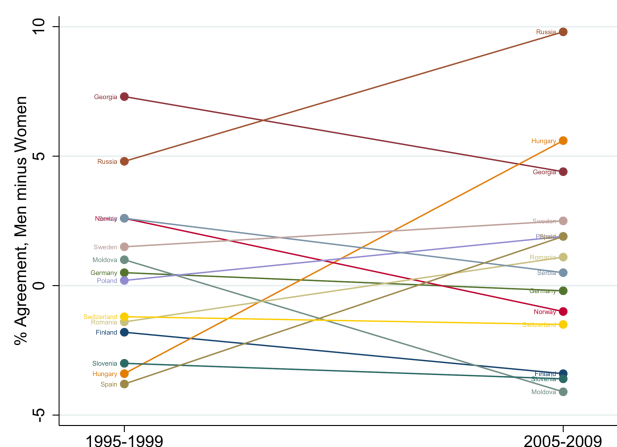


Source: Data are from the 1995-1998 wave of the World Values Survey. Individuals are asked the following question: *People*

talk about the changing roles of men and women today. For each of the following statements I read out, can you tell me how much you agree with each. Do you agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly? Both the husband and wife should contribute to household income. Countries selected are those in Europe and Central Asia where the question was asked in the 1995-1998 wave.

A recent strand of the economics literature analyzes the long-term determinants of attitudes and finds that they have very deep historical roots (see Giuliano, 2018). However, attitudes also evolve over time. Figures 4 and 5 show that while in some countries attitudes remain rather stable after 1998, in other countries they change substantially. In Russia, for instance, the gender difference in attitudes toward work has doubled over a period of ten years, with men becoming from 5 to 10 percentage points more likely than women to report that work is important to them. Turning to gender-role attitudes, the percent of respondents who think that a working mother can have a warm relationship with her children has increased the most in countries as different as Macedonia and Spain. The percent of individuals who think that both husband and wife should contribute to income has increased relatively sharply in Moldova, while declining rather substantially in Montenegro and especially in Serbia.

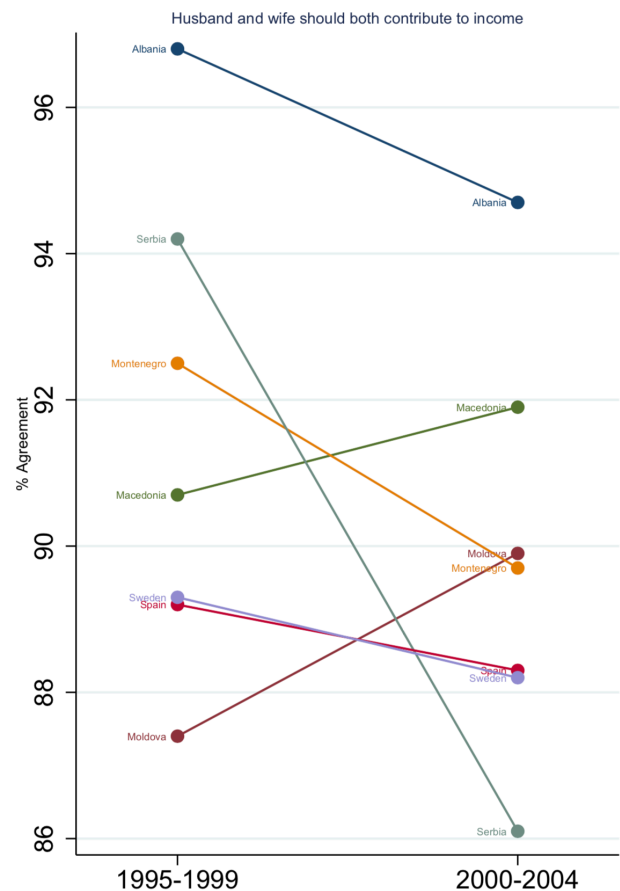
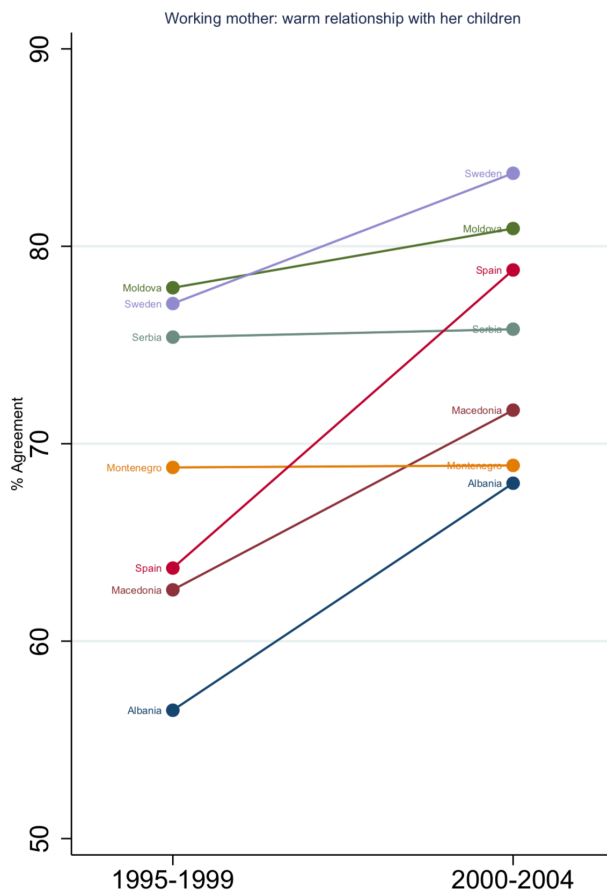
Figure 4. Gender differences in attitudes toward work over time.



Source: See Note to Figure 1.



Figure 5. Gender role attitudes over time.



Source: See Notes to Figures 2 and 3.

The graphs thus suggest that the attitudes considered here vary not only cross-sectionally but can also change over a relatively short time period. A natural question to ask is then: what type of shocks cause a change in gender differences in attitudes toward work and in gender role attitudes?

The role of politico-economic regimes in shaping attitudes

In recent work (Campa and Serafinelli, 2018), we show that politico-economic regimes that focus on women's inclusion in the labor market can reduce gender differences in attitudes toward work and make gender-role attitudes less traditional. Studying the question of whether politico-economic regimes can change attitudes is difficult, because countries or regions exposed to different

regimes are likely very different along many other dimensions, including their history, which is known to shape attitudes. To circumvent this problem, we exploit the imposition of state-socialist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe and their efforts to promote women's economic inclusion (see Campa and Serafinelli, 2018). First we focus on the socialist regime that emerged in East-Germany in 1949. This regime favored women's access to tertiary education and to qualified employment through massive childcare provision and other policies that were popular throughout the entire Central and Eastern European region. Conversely, in West-Germany, women were encouraged to either stay home after they had children or take part-time jobs after extended breaks (Trappe, 1996; Shaffer, 1961). Since East and West-Germany before 1949 were



part of the same country and as such had a common history and shared institutions, we can compare attitudes in East- and West-Germany after the separation to isolate the impact of different politico-economic regimes on attitudes. In other words, the underlying hypothesis is that attitudes toward work and gender role attitudes in East- and West-Germany were the same before the separation. Such a hypothesis is arguably valid especially because we compare only individuals who, during the separated years, lived relatively close to the East-West border (e.g. within 50 km from the border), and are, thus, expected to have close enough (geography, culture and social norm-driven) preferences and attitudes before the separation.

The results of the comparison can be summarized as follows: (a) due to exposure to a different politico-economic regime, East-German women participated more in the labor market and became more educated than their West-German counterparts; (b) the importance given to work by East-German women increased, which led to a lower gender gap in attitudes toward work with respect to West-Germany; (c) both women and men in East-Germany developed less traditional attitudes than West Germans regarding the relationship of working mothers with their children and the gender division of roles in the household.

In the second part of the paper, we also extend the analysis to a number of transition countries in the Central and Eastern European region. We show that in Central and Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1990 gender-role attitudes became less traditional than in Western Europe.

Conclusion

In this brief we have documented that gender differences in attitudes toward work and gender role attitudes vary substantially across space and can change over a relatively short time period. Since these attitudes affect the level of gender inequality in the labor market, understanding

their determinants is important and policy-relevant. In recent work (Campa and Serafinelli, 2018), we exploit the imposition of state-socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and show that individuals exposed to different regimes develop different attitudes toward work and different gender-role attitudes.

Such a finding suggests that policies aimed at increasing women's participation in the labor market can activate virtuous cycles; namely, such policies might improve the cultural acceptance of female work, thus potentially further raising women's labor force participation. The evidence from the Central and Eastern European region also suggests that history is not necessarily an excuse for inaction regarding women's participation in the labor market. While deeply rooted cultural norms can be an obstacle to women's economic empowerment, these norms are not necessarily absolutely time-invariant, and can respond to important economic and policy shocks.

A caveat to such conclusions is that the evidence presented here is specific to women's attitudes toward work and attitudes regarding the acceptability of female work. Other attitudes and norms are also important in defining the level of gender equality in a society, such as those involving the division of roles in a couple when both couple members work outside of the home, the acceptability of violence against women, the suitability of women and men to different fields of education. Little is known about these attitudes and more research is needed to understand which policies, if any, can change them.

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