Social Norms and Gender Inequality in South Asia

Despite decades of economic growth, gender inequality in South Asia remains remarkably high. A key stylised fact from descriptive analyses is that, apart from education, norms-sensitive outcomes – such as economic participation, marriage age, agency, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) – for South Asian women born across half a century has remained stagnant and, in some cases, regressed. In the case of Pakistan, employment for women increased on average just 0.3 percentage points during each of the decades that separates the generations of women born in the 1950s from those born in the 1990s. In all other South Asian countries (apart from Bangladesh), economic participation rates of women have decreased during the last 50 years. Recent research has also highlighted that women have been impacted more severely in the short-run by the COVID-19 crisis. Surveys run during the pandemic period show that women-led businesses, especially small firms, were more likely to be closed and resumed operations more slowly compared to businesses led by men.

Research has also shown that gender inequality has growth penalties. Misallocation of talent – the fact that women tend to be segregated to some specific sector (garment or personal services) – or misallocation of capital – women-led small firms find it harder to access credit – reduce growth by a significant amount.

Although not the only one, social norms have been identified as a crucial driver of gender outcomes. During the pandemic, increased demand for caregivers (because of school closures) affected women disproportionally and with greater intensity in countries with more stringent social norms.

Many interventions to address gender gaps have been implemented and important gains have been achieved. However, policies are often blind to social norms, leading to mixed successes. Identifying and measuring more precisely the norms at play can be transformative to eliminate long-standing disparities in the region. Reducing gender inequality is an essential component in achieving inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Against this backdrop, the session invites papers addressing one of the following (or related) questions:

- What do we know about the role of norms when it comes to women and girls’ outcomes and gender equality in South Asia? How have norms affected gender equality during/after COVID-19?
- What policies/interventions have been proven to positively impact norms and outcomes linked to women's economic participation? What has proven ineffective and why (i.e., mechanisms, design, implementation)?
- What is the status of women-led businesses in the region? What are their main obstacles? Are women-led firms an avenue of economic empowerment and/or an engine of employment (for other women)?

In addition to contributed papers, this session will feature a presentation of the World Bank’s South Asia Economic Focus, Spring 2022 issue and its research programme on social norms and gender inequality.
Panel Organisers

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