

# Despite social development, gender attitudes chart different course globally

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In the half century since the birth of the women's movement in the West in the 1960s, support for gender equality has spread around the globe—but in uneven ways. A multinational study by University of California, Davis, sociologists charts three distinct transitions in gender attitudes associated with national characteristics.

Professor Xiaoling Shu and graduate students Bowen Zhu and Kelsey Meagher used two-step machine learning to analyze data from the World Values Survey on more than 70,000 people in 47 countries—the largest number of countries ever studied on [gender](#) attitudes—to compare [support](#) for [women](#)'s rights as well as support for women combining work and family.

They will present the study, "Classifying and Mapping Gender Ideologies Globally: Gender Attitudes in 47 Countries," in Philadelphia at the 113th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA) on Aug. 14.

The researchers compared gender attitudes with individual variables such as gender, income, education and religion, as well three country-level influences: [economic development](#), women's economic independence and workforce participation.

They found the highest support for equal rights and gender roles in countries with the highest rates of women participating in the labor force.

"Although economic development has liberalized attitudes toward gender equality, it has not led to growing support for women's dual roles as mothers and workers, largely due to the policies of liberal and conservative welfare states which are based on a male breadwinner model and provide little institutional support for working women," the authors conclude.

"On the other hand, despite high levels of women as primary wage earners and strong maternity provision in former socialist countries, women's paid employment has not routinely led to beliefs about their equal rights and status with men."

They identified three distinct trajectories of transition in gender attitudes away from traditional patriarchal views:

- The first taken by the social democratic countries of Finland, Sweden and Norway is characterized by high economic development, high rates of women's labor force participation and high levels of women's economic independence. These features promote a highly egalitarian gender ideology toward women's rights and dual mother-worker roles.
- The second trajectory taken by liberal and conservative Western countries such as the United States, Germany and New Zealand are characterized by economic wealth, modest rates of women's [labor force participation](#), fewer women as chief wage earners and meager maternity provisions. This combination produces a liberal individualist ideology, endorsing women's equality with men while subjecting women to culturally prescribed expectations of intensive mothering.
- The last route has been taken by former socialist states such as Russia, China and Romania, which features far less economic development, a high degree of women as chief wage earners and decent maternity leave provisions. These characteristics foster an

ideology that upholds male supremacy.

Previous studies have been mixed on the links between women's labor participation and gender attitudes. They examined only a few industrialized countries and didn't control for other national characteristics.

"Our analysis shows that people in countries with high rates of women's employment strongly endorse women's equal rights and dual roles," Shu and colleagues write.

They found that a country's wealth, as measured by gross national product, fosters support for gender equality but diminishes approval for women's dual work/family roles.

Conversely, women's economic independence, by itself, has a different effect from GDP per capita. In countries with high proportions of female breadwinners and generous childcare leave provisions, support rose for women working to support their families but it is not associated with endorsement for women to gain equal rights and opportunities.

Sometimes, even in the more liberal nations, attitudes reverse direction.

In another study, presented at an ASA meeting in 2014 and recently published in the journal [\*Social Forces\*](#), Shu and Meagher found that declining support for gender equality in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s corresponds to a rise of professional men working long hours and women picking up the slack in caring for home and family.

Shu and Zhu will present the new research findings during a 10:30 a.m.-12:10 session on globalization, immigration and gender at the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Level 5, Salon H, on Tuesday, Aug. 14.

Provided by UC Davis

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