

# Surprising insights from a global study on perceptions of gender norms

May 22 2023, by Krysten Crawford

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Not long ago, a team of researchers made a startling discovery about attitudes toward women in Saudi Arabia. Most young married men in the country were privately in favor of women working outside of the home

but mistakenly believed that a majority of their peers were not.

After being told that most married men in their age range actually support women's employment, they became more willing to help their own wives look for work—and women were more likely to take on higher-paying jobs.

Those [findings](#), published in the *American Economic Review* in 2020, raised an intriguing question: Was the disconnect between how views toward women were perceived, versus what they actually were, limited to Saudi Arabia? Or is it pervasive worldwide?

Turns out, Saudi Arabia is the rule—not the exception—when it comes to what people think others' attitudes about [gender](#) policies are and what those attitudes truly are, according to a new global study by Stanford economist Alessandra Voena and a team of researchers that included authors from the Saudi Arabia experiment.

"Misperceptions of gender norms are ubiquitous across the globe," says Voena, an economics professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences and a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR).

In the new paper, released by the National Bureau of Economic Policy Research, Voena and her co-authors analyze gender views in 60 countries representing 85% of the world's population. They find that people worldwide often misjudge what others think about certain policies supporting women and what the majority opinion actually is.

Men and women, for example, are often believed to be on opposite sides of gender issues, such as whether women should have an advantage in hiring for leadership positions in government and business. The [study data](#) suggest that such perceptions are wrong: Men and women are much

more aligned than people think.

And though the study's overall results show that, across the world, both genders support issues around women's rights to a much higher degree than [conventional wisdom](#) holds, the evidence suggests, too, that women tend to be less supportive, and men, more supportive than most people think.

The patterns uncovered in the study are so pervasive, Voena and her co-authors write, that they suggest that policies aimed at closing the gender gap—or the absences of such policies—may not reflect what people actually want.

The findings, Voena says, have important implications for efforts to design policies that narrow the gender gap.

"We are not saying that we have to get rid of these misperceptions," she says. "But if a goal of policymakers is to promote gender equality, it's useful to know as an initial step that we as a society are more progressive than people think and that maybe we should be acting according to those more progressive views."

## **What you think, what others think**

How is it that people are getting public opinion so wrong? Research since at least the early 1930s has consistently shown that people often misread societal attitudes—and that those miscalculations shape their behavior. In the context of gender issues, Voena and her co-authors suggest that misperceptions exist for a number of reasons. These include outdated gender stereotypes as well as the tendency for minority views to get outsized attention in the media and elsewhere.

"It also takes a while for people to learn that views change," says Voena,

pointing to human psychology as another reason.

**More information:** \Leonardo Bursztyn et al, How Are Gender Norms Perceived? *American Economic Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.3386/w31049](https://doi.org/10.3386/w31049) , [www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20180975](http://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20180975)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Surprising insights from a global study on perceptions of gender norms (2023, May 22) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-insights-global-perceptions-gender-norms.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.