

Polarising or unifying?

The impact of priming on attitudes towards women empowerment in Tunisia

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Abstract

Gender parity is one of the sustainable development goals and women empowering a major way to achieve this goal. In addition, empirical evidence suggests empowering women contributes to economic development through e.g. increased human capital accumulation and improved intra-household bargaining positions (Duflo, 2000; Duflo and Udry, 2004; Ashraf et al., 2010; Duflo 2012). Likewise, economic development can facilitate empowerment: reducing (extreme) poverty and improving educational and employment opportunities may be conducive to changing gender norms and facilitate a stronger position of women in society (Cuberes and Teignier, 2014). However, in many parts of the world, especially the MENA region, significant parts of society are unsupportive of women empowerment, as the role of women in society is defined by religious norms and traditions with pervasive stereotypes towards women's ability to take decisions (Duflo 2012; Klasen and Lamanna, 2009).

Tunisia is one such country where legal achievements to strengthen the position of women are not necessarily reflected in the public opinion. While the country is one of the most advanced in the region in terms of women rights, there is also a deep social and political divide on whether this is a desired evolution. In 2012 the constitution declared women equal to men, but in only reaction to violent mass demonstrations resulting from conservative parties' attempts to have a constitutional amendment that would render women 'complementary' to men. This is only one example of a polarized society caught between more progressive versus more conservative ideologies.

Following the recent surge in policies and interventions promoting women empowerment, women activist and political groups undertake information campaigns to raise awareness and inform about the role of women in society and about their legal rights which may help change

attitudes in favor of women empowerment. The question we are interested in is whether such awareness raising campaigns are successful, particularly in a context like Tunisia, where increased emphasis on women empowerment may be ineffective or even induce a backlash against female empowerment by strengthening conservative attitudes and behavior within households, and hence promote polarization instead.

We use two novel approaches to test our ideas. First, development interventions increasingly use tailored video content to induce attitudinal and behavioral change. A review by Bernard et al. (2015) generally demonstrates the effectiveness of video interventions, and their wide applicability across topics and countries. We use a 2-minute video, developed by Jeune Afrique for '13 August Tunisia Women's Day' (<http://dai.ly/x5wnrqq>), featuring all legal achievements on women rights in Tunisia starting from 1956, with the Code du Statut Personnel established by Habib Bourghiba, to 'prime' a randomly selected subsample of individuals on issues related women empowerment. Second, in addition to a standardized set of survey questions on self-reported attitudes towards empowerment we use an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to measure the (implicit) strength of association between male and female names and concepts of empowerment.

Due to the sensitive and potentially polarizing nature of the topic we may expect outcomes in the treatment group to follow a (stronger) bimodal distribution. More precisely, we would expect individuals with a positive attitude towards women empowerment may be 'encouraged' by being primed about the accumulation of rights and legal achievements over the years as emphasized in the treatment movie, whereas those opposing women empowerment may feel threatened by legal achievements. The former (latter) may thus exhibit much stronger positive (negative) reactions towards women empowerment than individuals in the control condition who are shown a neutral movie about Tunisia's world heritage sites.

Our study provides evidence whether video treatments, used in campaigns and awareness rising interventions, have 'average' effects, conform to the intentions of their design, or 'polarizing' effects, when the intended attitudinal and potential behavioral change is subject to strong controversy and sensitivity inspired by social and religious norms.