

Gender Norms and Gender identity: Review of alternative perspectives

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Abstract

Gender identity and gender norms have important social constructs shaping social structures and affecting socio-culture landscape of the society. But gender identity and gender norms also plays an important role in economic decision making and is recently used by economists for explaining many economic phenomenon specifically related to employment. The specific role of care giving associated with women has important social and economic implications. The review article focuses on economic interpretations and implications of gender norms and gender identities. Recent and current research trends in economic analysis highlights underlying factors which shape identities, divisions and social norms particularly in the context of labour market outcomes, financial decision making intra-households dynamics.

Keywords: gender norms, gender identity, identity economics, cultural economics

1. Introduction

Despite considerable progress and development women find it difficult to break stereotyping of roles especially related to care work and more importantly unpaid care work. The economist and sociologists consider this as an important manifestation of gender inequalities as well as an enabler which reinforce gender inequalities. The women have been successful in breaking the gender stereotyping as a bread winner but they find it hard to break their identities as care workers. Recent research indicates that inability to reduce the gender gap in labour market outcome may be due to rigidity of gender identities and prevailing social norms in the society (Altonji and Blank 1999^[4]; Akerlof and Kranton 2000^[1], 2010; Marianne 2011)^[25]. Akerlof and Kranton (2000, 2010)^[1] import insights about the importance of social and cultural identity from sociology into economics. They posit how identity, a person's sense of self, affects economic outcomes. Inclusion of psychological concept of identity into economic discourse is a recent phenomenon. The role of identity in economic analysis has been aptly put in perspective by following quotation:

“...because identity is fundamental to behavior, choice of identity may be the most important “economic” decision people make. Individuals may—more or less consciously—choose who they want to be. Limits on this choice may also be the most important determinant of an individual’s economic well-being. Previous economic analyses of, for example, poverty, labor supply, and schooling have not considered these possibilities.” Akerlof and Kranton (2000: 717)^[1].

Culture, measured in various forms, has been successfully employed in empirical investigations to enrich our understanding of economic behavior (Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales 2005). In addition to explaining contemporaneous variation in economic data, culture is also seen as the underlying cause for the correlation in cross generations economic behavior.

In past fifteen years considerable research has emerged in economic analysis to understand the underlying factors which shape identities, divisions and social norms (Altonji and Blank 1999^[4]; Akerlof and Kranton 2000^[1], 2010; Marianne 2011^[25]; Fortin 2005^[14]; Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales 2005; Kranton 2016^[22]; Kranton (2016)^[22] concluded that identity and norms are fractal. That is, they are mirrored processes occurring at many levels of the decision-making. Individuals, families, schools, governments, social movements—all shape divisions and norms which consequently affect economic outcomes. In view of the above development, we find it pertinent to survey the economic literature highlighting economic consequences of gender identity. This becomes more relevant in a seminar on ‘literature as mirror to the soul of a culture’ discussing culture based gender identities in literature.

2. Gender identity and women’s stereotyping as care workers

Fortin (2005)^[14] using data from the World Values Surveys shows that the social representation of women as homemakers and men as breadwinners appears quite stable and is very predictive of women’s labor market outcomes. Kuhn and Shen (2013) shown that even if women decide to participate in the labor force, gender norms play a major role in recruiting processes. Mathiowetz, and Oliner (2005)^[26] argued that care giving has been associated with women, at least since it was incorporated into the emerging feminine sphere of domesticity in nineteenth-century notions of gendered “separate spheres.” Ideas about female nature, sensibility, and identity that evolved at the same time also centered on care giving. Sharma (2016)^[17] quoting many empirical studies (Prince 2004; Serrano-Aguilar *et al.*, 2006^[36]; Papastavrou *et al.* 2009^[29]; Prince 2009^[32]; Akpınar *et al.*, 2011^[3]; del-Pino-Casado *et al.* 2012^[10]; Tang *et al.* 2013)^[38] concluded that women are the predominant providers of informal care for family members with chronic medical conditions or disabilities, including the elderly and those with other mental illness across the countries and cultures. Though men are increasingly assuming roles as caregivers but

family-caregiving still remains a predominantly feminine activity despite changes in social structures and norms. As noted earlier, care giving often entails bearing emotional, physical, social and financial burden making it a stressful experience.

Armstrong and Armstrong (2004)^[1] observed that women are about twice as likely as men to be caregivers, whether they live inside the home or outside. Gender identity norms may help to explain why occupational segregation by gender has been slow to disappear. Women may feel discomfort entering certain professions, and men may feel discomfort if women enter these professions if the professions are strongly "gendered". Hochschild and Machung (2012)^[18] using time-use data showed that, controlling for both individuals' incomes, when the wife starts to earn more than the husband, she starts taking on more of the household tasks. Perhaps these 'threatening' wives do this in order to lessen their husbands' unease with the situation.

3. What drives gender identity norms?

Gender identity is defined as a personal conception of oneself as male or female. It is one's personal experience of one's own gender. Schiebinger (1999) opined that gender identities refer to how individuals and groups perceive and present themselves, and how they are perceived by others. Gender identities are cultural and context-specific. Gender identity is generally self-identified depending on combination of inherent and extrinsic or environmental factors. The identities are influenced by social norms to a limited extent. Mackie *et al.* (2012)^[24] outline a distinction between descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms relates to the question 'what most people do' where as injunctive norms refers to 'what the majority of people think others should do'. Keleher and Franklin (2012) conceptualises that gender norms are values and attitudes based social roles and behaviours that are deeply embedded in social structures and they manifest at various levels, including within households and families, communities, neighbourhoods, and wider society. Gender norms ensure the maintenance of social order and they interact to produce outcomes which are frequently inequitable. Evans (2014)^[11] argues that social gender norms justify unequal gender divisions of labor on the basis of self-interest, as an individual can acquire social respect by following cultural norms. She further argues that presumptions about cultural expectations play a key role in facilitating or constraining change in gendered behaviour arguing that these changes are more likely to happen when men and women are exposed to more egalitarian models, in adulthood or childhood, and where people do not fear social disapproval for failing to conform to gender stereotypes. Boudet *et al.* (2012) introduce the concept of gender norms bending and relaxing, where gender ideals remain intact but practices have changed. Pearse and Connell (2016)^[30] note that gender norms do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in every aspect of cultural life and institutions, and need to be understood as a set of interrelationships between individuals and groups that have the power to both reproduce them and also exercise agency to change them. By conforming to the gender norms and expectations of their culture, people can gain social approval as they convey and reinforce their masculinity or femininity accordingly.

Many believe that gender role attitudes are largely determined in early childhood, and several papers have documented

something akin to an intergenerational transmission of gender identity norms (Moen, Erickson and McClain 1997^[27]; O'Bryan, Fishbein, and Ritchey 2004^[28]; Bisin and Verdier, 2010^[8]; González and Rica 2012)^[16]. Fernandez *et al.* (2004) argue that men growing up in families with working mothers tend to be more comfortable with having their wives work. These men may have developed less stereotypical gender role attitudes, with weaker association between their masculinity and exclusive breadwinning. Farre and Vella (2007) directly test for the intergenerational transmission of gender role attitudes and inferred that cultural attitudes towards working women are passed from generation to generation and that this cultural transmission has important implications for the economic behavior of the younger generations. The study highlighted presence of a strong relationship between the responses of a woman regarding the role of females in the family and the labor market and those of her children. Pearse and Connell (2016)^[30] illustrates that assuming the sway of gender socialisation, or smooth passing on of gender norms from generation to generation, without recognising that change runs the risk of undervaluing the agency of social actors, one that can only be corrected by tracking change overtime. Linda Blair (quoted in Radhika 2017)^[33], a clinical psychologist, is firmly camped in the other school of thought.

"As much as we supposedly try, we still often raise our girls to be more compliant than our boys," she says, explaining that these traits are taught to children at an early age. "We mothers do give more caregiving skills to our daughters. They are equipped and less likely to make a fuss. In order not to stir things up they take on the burden." She thinks that boys are less likely to become care givers because of the tradition of the male breadwinner. Even though that is changing, she says it's an idea still passed on to boys by their parents.

Gender is a socio-cultural concept with strong economic and political implications. Human beings are mammals hence are born as males or females. But the process of bringing up of children converts them into gendered beings. The social cultural machinery aims to turn them into men and women who are masculine and feminine respectively. They are made to internalize the patterns of behavior, thinking and feeling. So gender can be said to refer to socially constructed and defined categories and characteristics of men and women. The gender in any culture shapes the idea of the feminine and the masculine, which is central to the identity formation of an individual in any society. It defines how a person would look, what a person would wear, what a person would eat, what will be the likings and disliking of a person, what will be behavioral pattern of a person, what will be occupations and professions assigned to a person. This carving out of the spaces also defines their social, political and economic rights, choices and status. The culture makes a gendered division of labor is one in which women and men are supposed to take up certain tasks and are at the same time prohibited from performing certain tasks. This association is further reinforced by the general idea of femininity which defines women as mothers, caring, nurturing, self-sacrificing, self-effacing etc. Their association The women traditionally rather image of women have been associated with care services like child rearing, taking care of the sick, hospitality etc.

At the heart of this division of labour also lies the exploitation of women labor. They have traditionally been given the tasks which are not paid tasks. The women have been traditionally predominantly associated with household work. The labor which is generally falls in the category of duties rather than the category of economically productive activity. So they were not recognized or acknowledged as productive economic agents in society. Most of the care services were once done within the family. They were not paid jobs. Hence they were assigned to women. Women have been associated with these services. With the evolution of economic systems these jobs began to be outsourced. When women started working, it was natural for them to take up the job which they have been trained for, have been doing. it was also natural for the employers to offer them the jobs they thought women are trained for and naturally fit to do.

4. Role of Culture, social norms and gender identity in Economic Decision Making

Economists have long highlighted the importance of traditional norms for economic outcomes. Gammage, Kabeer, and Rodgers (2016) ^[15] observed that economists increasingly acknowledge that decision making is often carried out between individuals with pronounced inequalities in power over the decision-making process. This view of decision-making has given rise to game-theoretic approaches that seek to model how decisions might be made in situations of conflict between individuals with different resources to fall back on should the process break down. Pearse and Connell (2016) ^[30] opined that gender norms persists due to self interest and they subsequently garner resources, decision making power and control to particular individuals in the household that are negotiated and contested though as Arabandi (2016) ^[5] argues that in a context where women's work is both undercounted and undervalued, middle-class women are slowly entering male-dominated occupations without causing many ripples but making sure they are not invisible within the workplace or the household. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived. Expectations about attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men and about the relations between women and men are shaped by culture (Schalkwyk, 2000) ^[34]. Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan (2015) ^[7] recently shown that gender identity norms, and in particular the norm that "a man should earn more than his wife," impact a wide range of social and economic outcomes including the distribution of relative income within households, the patterns of marriage, divorce and women's labor market participation, and the division of home production activities between husbands and wives. Their paper suggested that the behavioral prescription that "a man should earn more than his wife" helps explain economic and social outcomes even in the most recent decade, this does not imply that this prescription is as strong today as it was in the past. Another interesting result of their research was the finding that within a marriage markets over time, when a randomly chosen woman becomes more likely to earn more than a randomly chosen man, the marriage rate declines (Watson and McLanahan 2011) ^[1]. Akerlof and Kranton (2000, 2010) ^[1] import identities and norms from sociology and social psychology to economics and emphasize that people's perceptions of "who they are" and "what is proper" are fundamental to their preferences. They propose models where one's identity directly enters the utility function:

under this model, one's identity can influence economic outcomes because deviating from the prescribed behavior is inherently costly. Hence, people's economic actions can in part be explained by a desire to conform to one's sense of self. Ke (2016) shown that gender identity norms constrain women's influence over intra-household financial decisions and traditional gender norms are likely to render households even more vulnerable in the modern financial system.

5. Conclusions

The review article focused on economic interpretations and implications of gender norms and gender identities. Recent and current research trends in economic analysis highlights underlying factors which shape identities, divisions and social norms particularly in the context of labour market outcomes, financial decision making intra-households dynamics. As recent research evidence, the discipline of economics today considers wide variety of non-economic motives rather than consumption, production and exchange. The identity economics brings a new dimension in economic analysis bringing social, cultural and gender norms in preference formation and economic decision making. In every social context, people have a notion of who they are, which is associated with beliefs about how they and others are supposed to behave and these notions plays an important role in how economics work. Nobel Prize-winning economist George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton provides an important and compelling new way to understand human behavior, revealing how our identities—and not just economic incentives— influence our decisions. They explain how our conception of who we are and who we want to be may shape our economic lives more than any other factor, affecting how hard we work, and how we learn, spend, and save. They provide us with relevant tools and language for incorporating social, cultural and gender norms in economic analysis. Many recent studies have highlighted the identity related bottlenecks for lower female work force participation outcomes.

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