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# **Heterogeneous impact of traveling to Western countries on gender norms in Middle East and North Africa countries**

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**Heterogeneous impact of traveling to Western countries on gender norms in Middle East and North Africa countries\***

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**Abstract**

Social gender norms shape individuals' opportunities and actions. Traditional and gender biased norms can contribute to persistent gender disparities. However, counter-stereotypical images can shift an expected behavior for men and women. This paper investigates if traveling to Western countries relaxes gender norms in the Middle East and North Africa region using the Arab Barometer data. Preliminary empirical findings suggest that international travel to Western countries is associated with relaxed gender norms only for those individuals who spend abroad longer than one month and only for less binding gender norms not related to changing power relationships between males and females.

**JEL classification:** F29, J16, O53

**Key words:** transfer of norms, gender, international travel, Middle East and North Africa

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## Introduction

There have been remarkable gains worldwide for women during the past quarter century. Gender gap in access to economic opportunities and resources was narrowing down, but substantial gender disparities still persist. One of the main factors which may constrain achievement of gender equality is gender norms which shape women's and men's opportunities and actions (Munoz Boudet et al. 2012). Even though gender norms are slow to change, they can be relaxed or negotiated through different channels. Technological changes, counter-stereotypical images, changes in legislations can shift an expected behavior for men and women (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, Deutsch 2007).

International travel can expose travelers to new social context with different beliefs, norms and values which can challenge one's established views by offering an alternative vision. There is a growing strand of literature focusing on the transfer of norms associated with international migration. In particular, there are studies providing empirical evidence on how international migration changes fertility (de Haas 2006, Beine, Docquer and Schiff 2009), gender power relations (Belanger and Tran 2011), political norms (Chauvet and Mercier 2014) and finally education, fertility, employment and gender norms (Tuccio and Wahba 2015). However, there is still lack of quantitative studies directly testing a hypothesis that travel to Western countries can be associated with changes in gender norms. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies testing a heterogeneous impact of international travel on different norms depending on the length of stay abroad.

The main goal of this paper is to explore whether exposure to different norms through travelling to Western countries is related to the changes in gender norms in the countries of origin. In addition, we hypothesize and empirically test that international travel is related to the changes if a traveler spent enough time abroad and only on less rigid norms which do not assume deviation from the expected behavior or change in the power and as a result are less binding.

The Arab Barometer, which measures politically-relevant attitudes of ordinary citizens, is going to be used to answer the proposed research question. Middle East and North African (MENA) countries are very interesting to study. According to the World Bank (2004), MENA's achievements in many areas of women's well-being compare favorably to other regions in the World. Nevertheless, there is a substantial gender gap in favor of men in terms of economic participation and political empowerment. One of the reasons for this phenomenon can be traditional social gender norms and attitudes in favor of men. The region is also characterized by high rates of internal and external migration making it an interesting laboratory to test our research questions.

The attitude to the following statements were used to measure gender norms: married women can work outside home, university education is more important for males, equal rights between men and women should be stipulated in Constitution, and finally men are better political leaders than women. Two latter norms are hypothesized to be less binding, while the first two seem to be more directly related to the changes in power and observed behavior and as a result are considered to be harder to change. Control variable to measure exposure to different values is defined by a question on how long time an individual spent during last five years in any Western country: the USA, Europe or Canada.

The paper continues as follows. In Section 2, we present a brief literature review. In Section 3, we describe data used and the empirical strategy. In Section 4, we present the empirical results, followed by the conclusions in Section 5.

## 2. Literature review

According to the World Bank (2011), narrowing gaps in human capital and physical assets may not be enough to eradicate differences in gender outcomes because women and men have unequal capacity to exercise agency. Agency is defined as actor's or group's ability to make purposeful choices. It is a process through which women and men use their endowments in economic opportunities to achieve desired outcomes (Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland 2006). Therefore, agency is the key factor behind understanding inequality in gender outcomes. Dimensions of agency may include control over resources, ability to move freely, decision making over family formation, freedom from the risk of violence and ability to have voice in society. Advance in agency in one dimension does not necessarily mean improvement in other dimensions as well (Samman and Santos 2009).

There were many quantitative studies analyzing determinants of agency. The useful summary of empirical results is discussed in Samman and Santos (2009). Overall, the following factors are found to be associated with women agency: education, land ownership, labor market status, age, family structure and number of children. In addition, social norms – defined as acceptable roles, responsibilities, and behaviors for men and women - can determine and constrain the space for women to exercise their agency (World Bank 2011). In fact, there are studies showing that norms play more important role for agency than access to assets (Kamal and Zunaid 2006, Allendorf 2007). Beliefs, commonly held about the role of women, had significant impact on individual work and fertility outcome (Fernandez and Fogli 2009). Importance of social norms for agency is also documented in Munoz Boudet et al. (2012) who conducted extensive qualitative study in twenty countries with 500 focus groups.

The process of changing and adjusting social norms in the society is quite slow because deviation from them can be penalized. In addition, traditional practices are often universal making it hard for an individual even to imagine alternative views. It may happen also that a particular benefiting group will use different mechanisms to maintain the status quo. Sometimes individuals reject the norms, but mistakenly believe that everybody else accepts them (World Bank 2011).

Nevertheless, exposure to other ways of life associated with social globalization is one of the ways which can induce social norms to change (Berggren and Nilsson 2015). For example, Jensen and Oster (2009) demonstrated that spread of cable TV in India reduced son preference, fertility, and the reported acceptability of beating, and increased women's autonomy and female school enrollment.

International travel is a natural way to be exposed to other ways of life and gender norms. In economic literature, however, the focus was mostly on the impact of international migration on female employment through remittances and lost labor effect. Remittances sent home by husbands can reduce incentives for women to participate in the labor market, but lose of labor can in contrast force women to substitute missing men (Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2006, Justino and Shemyakina 2012).

Still there is a growing number of studies which examine directly how international migrants may change fertility behavior at home through adaptation of migrants' fertility behavior to the norms of host countries (De Haas 2006, Beine et al. 2009, Bertoli and Marchetta 2015). Transmitting channels include migrants themselves who return home. It can be also direct communication with family members, relatives and friends home. Migrants can trigger an interest in the media coverage of the host countries. Migration networks stimulate trade and investment between countries. These business contacts can also help to diffuse host country norms in home countries (Beine et al. 2009).

We hypothesize that exposure to more balanced gender values and ways of life where women are more active in the politics, labor markets and the social life may change the gender norms directly. Moreover, we hypothesize that norms not associated with changes in observed behavior and power relationships-and as a result not associated with strong sanctions- are easier to change (Sen, Ostlin and George 2007).

Middle East and North African countries were selected to test these hypotheses. Social norms and attitudes in the region are believed to hinder reducing gender gap even though MENA's achievements in many areas of women's well-being compare favorably to other regions in the World (World Bank 2004). To the best of our knowledge, there are no empirical studies testing impact of international travel on the gender norms in MENA. There is a study testing how return migration affect gender norms in Jordan and authors demonstrate that returnees from more conservative countries have a negative impact on self-perceived status of women (Tuccio and Wahba 2015). In contrast, in our paper we test if traveling to more liberal Western countries can be a natural way associated with shifting gender norms towards a more balanced view.

### **3. Data and empirical strategy**

#### **Data**

This paper uses the microdata from the Arab Democracy Barometer. The main objectives of the Arab Barometer are to produce accurate and reliable data on the politically-relevant attitudes of ordinary citizens, to disseminate and apply survey findings in order to contribute to political reform, and to strengthen institutional capacity for public opinion research (<http://www.arabbarometer.org/>). For our particular research purpose, the third wave was used because it was the only wave to contain information about traveling to Western countries. Third wave was conducted during 2012-2014 years.

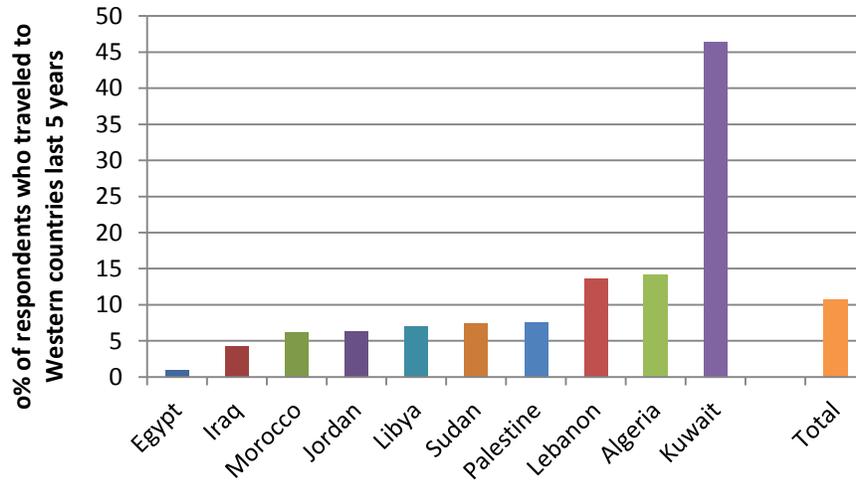
Initial data include twelve Middle East and North African countries. For each country the sample size was about 1,200 giving in total 14,809 observations. Adults aged 18 and older were surveyed in each country. The survey in each country is designed to be nationally representative at the household level. We had to drop two countries (Yemen and Tunisia) from the analysis because comparable information on education of respondents was missing.

Four questions have been selected to measure gender norms. The first one is "do you agree or disagree that a married woman can work outside the home." The second one is "do you agree or disagree that in general, men are better at political leadership than women". The third one is "do you agree or disagree that university education is more important for males than university education for females". The last one is the following "As you may know, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya are currently in the phase of drafting new

constitutions. Considering your own country’s constitution, what is the importance of the constitution in insuring equal rights between men and women?”

International traveling is measured by the following question “During the past five years, did you spend time in a Western country (European country, Canada, the United States)?” For those who traveled, time spent abroad is also reported. Figure 1 shows percentage of individuals in each country who spent any time in a Western country during the past five years.

Figure 1. Percentage of individuals who traveled to Western countries during last 5 years, %



Source: Arab Barometer, authors’ calculation.

Notes: The results are shown for cleaned pooled data without Tunisia and Yemen.

We grouped answers to gender statements into a dummy showing either agreement or disagreement with the statement. Percentage of respondents agreeing with four selected statements is presented across gender and dummy for traveling in figures 2 and 3. In terms of gender differences as one would expect, more gender balanced views are present among women. For example, 78 percent of men agree that married women can work outside home compared to 90 percent among women. In terms of the difference in gender views between individuals who visited Western countries and those who did not, the gap is less pronounced, but still significant in three out of four statements. Those who have been abroad believe less that men are better political leaders and are more likely to share the view that equal rights between women and men should be in the constitution. Interestingly, that in two other statements there is either no difference or travelers share even less gender neutral views (university education is more important for men). This is in line with our hypothesis that some norms are slow to change, especially if the changes require a shift in the observed behavior and power.

Figure 2. Agreement with different statements across gender

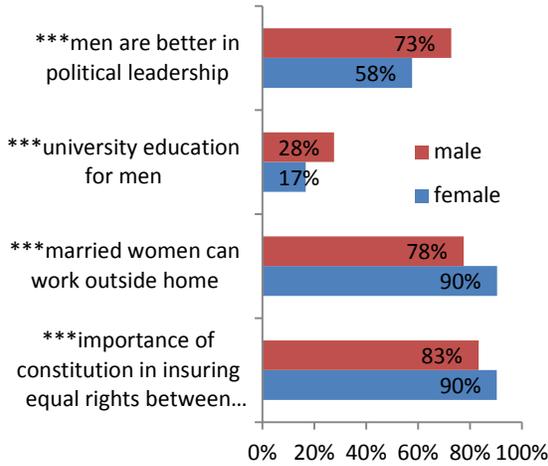
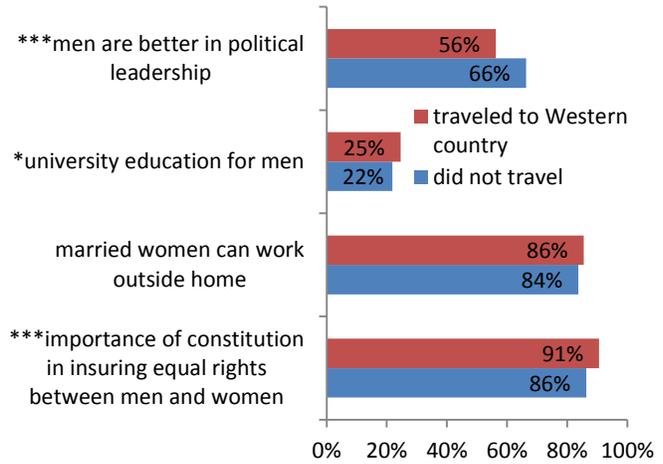


Figure 3 Agreement with different statements across travelers to Western countries



Source: Arab Barometer, authors' calculation.

Notes: The results are shown for cleaned pooled data without Tunisia and Yemen.

## Empirical strategy

General specification of the model to investigate the impact of being abroad on gender norms in country  $c$  across individuals  $i$  is the following:

$$\text{GenderNorm}_{ic} = \alpha + \beta \text{Traveled}_{ic} + \delta X_{ic} + F_c + \varepsilon_{ic}, \text{ where} \quad (1)$$

$\text{GenderNorm}_{ic}$  is a dummy variable taking one for those individuals who agree or strongly agree with the following gender related statements across set of countries: men are better political leaders, university education is more important for men, married women can work outside home and insuring equal rights between men and women are important in constitution.

$\text{Traveled}_{ic}$  is the main variable of interest taking one for those individuals who traveled to Western countries during last 5 years. This variable is also interacted with gender to differentiate the impact of travel for men and women.

$F_c$  captures all time invariant country specific features such as legal origins, endowments, or past institutions with long-lasting effects.  $\varepsilon_{ic}$  is an error term.

Vector  $X_{ic}$  includes the set of variables which are traditionally used in empirical literature testing determinants of social norms and agency (Samman and Santos 2009). In particular, we include: age, income status, marital and employment status, education, religion, computer availability, residence in urban or rural

<sup>1</sup> There are empirical studies showing that localities within countries can be more important predictors' of women agency than individual or household characteristics (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001). Therefore, we have tested robustness of our results including country specific regional dummies in the regressions. Results hold and available upon request. Regional dummies were not included in the general specification because Arab Barometer survey is not designed to be representative at regional level.

areas. We expect that being younger, better educated, less religious and living in urban areas is likely to be associated with more balanced views on gender.

Simple probit regression is estimated to run the model. We also amend slightly the general specification, replacing a single dummy for travelers to three dummies to take into account the length of stay abroad.

One potential caveat in our analysis is a bias which can be associated with omitted variables correlated with international traveling and gender norms, but not included in the regression. In other words, individuals traveling to Western countries can be systematically different based on unobservable characteristics from other population and failure to account for this fact can lead to a biased estimate for the impact of traveling on norms. One can imagine that travelers to Western countries are more open minded, value globalization and as a result may have more gender balanced views.

In studies exploring impact of migration on norms the same problem persists given that migrants in general and return migrants in particular are not a random sample of population and can be systematically different both in observables and unobservables characteristics. Empirical studies try to correct using different instrumental variables. For example, Tuccio and Wahba (2015) and Bertoli and Marchetta (2015) used oil prices and external shocks to correct for international migration and return migration selectivity in single country studies.

Given that finding a valid and relevant instrumental variable does not seem to be feasible in the data we use, we explored existing variables to test robustness of our results and minimize the risk of a selection bias. In particular, we included the variable measuring positive attitude to globalization and connectivity to regressions. The variable is measured by positive answer to question “Do you think that the increase in global connectivity is a good or a bad thing for the society?” Secondly, for robustness check, we have run the model replacing the traveling dummy by another variable – plans to migrate. The idea is that if we believe that norms shift when an individual travel than we should not expect the same sign and significant impact of planned migration on the dependent variable because potential migrants has not been yet directly exposed to new environment, information and so forth. Obviously, this is an imperfect test given that international migrants can be very different from travelers to Western countries.

## 4. Results

Empirical results obtained from the probit regressions explaining probability of agreement with four gender statements are presented in table 1. All control variables have an expected sign. *Ceteris paribus*, consistent with descriptive statistics, men tend to have less gender balanced views. Being married, better educated, less religious and having better access to computers are positively associated with more gender balanced views on norms related to female work outside home and appropriateness of university education for women. Better education has a particular strong impact consistent with other studies in the field (e.g. Al Riyamia, Afifib and Mabryc 2004).

Expectedly older individuals are more conservative in their attitude to the statements on men being better political leaders and flexibility to work outside home for married women, but conservative views get less pronounced after some point. Interestingly, that younger individuals tend to agree more with the statement that university education is more important for men, but the impact becomes weaker with age.

Table 1. Probit regression explaining impact of traveling to Western countries on gender norms, marginal effects are reported

|  | Equal rights for men and women in Constitution are important | Men are better political Leaders | Married women can work outside home | University education is more important for male |
|--|--|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Spent time in Western countries                            | 0.00941**<br>[0.00476]                                       | -0.0775***<br>[0.0266]           | -0.00630***<br>[0.00187]            | 0.0493**<br>[0.0242]                            |
| Age  | -0.000558<br>[0.000444]                                      | 0.000990**<br>[0.000501]         | -0.000340***<br>[0.000115]          | -0.00128***<br>[0.000423]                       |
| Age squared  | 0.00000784<br>[5.12e-06]                                     | -8.45e-08*<br>[5.00e-08]         | 3.99e-06***<br>[1.32e-06]           | 1.17e-07***<br>[4.21e-08]                       |
| Male   | -0.0178***<br>[0.00221]                                      | 0.159***<br>[0.0123]             | -0.00932***<br>[0.000641]           | 0.124***<br>[0.0106]                            |
| Male*spent time in Western countries                       | -0.00565<br>[0.00776]  | -0.0167<br>[0.0341]              | 0.00336***<br>[0.00107]             | -0.0573**<br>[0.0263]                           |
| Employed   | -0.00222<br>[0.00240]  | 0.00464<br>[0.0130]              | -4.61E-04<br>[0.000602]             | -0.0033<br>[0.0110]                             |
| Married  | -0.000276<br>[0.00237]                                       | -0.0291**<br>[0.0132]            | 0.00180***<br>[0.000666]            | -0.0246**<br>[0.0116]                           |
| Urban areas  | -0.000858<br>[0.00201]                                       | 0.0215*<br>[0.0126]              | 0.00138**<br>[0.000568]             | -0.0153<br>[0.0108]                             |
| Illiterate/no formal education                             |  |                                  | base                                |   |
| Elementary   | 0.00655*<br>[0.00350]  | -0.00657<br>[0.0219]             | -5.70E-05<br>[0.000954]             | -0.0522***<br>[0.0173]                          |
| Basic  | 0.00553<br>[0.00393]   | -0.0261<br>[0.0222]              | 8.15E-04<br>[0.000924]              | -0.0581***<br>[0.0174]                          |
| Secondary  | 0.00645<br>[0.00395]   | -0.0367<br>[0.0232]              | 0.00265***<br>[0.000870]            | -0.0909***<br>[0.0174]                          |
| Mid-level diploma  | 0.00681<br>[0.00415]   | -0.042<br>[0.0260]               | 0.00325***<br>[0.000805]            | -0.0697***<br>[0.0187]                          |
| BA   | 0.00788*<br>[0.00405]  | -0.0433*<br>[0.0251]             | 0.00420***<br>[0.000761]            | -0.100***<br>[0.0178]                           |
| MA and above   | -0.00469<br>[0.00928]  | -0.108**<br>[0.0532]             | 2.64E-03<br>[0.00164]               | -0.136***<br>[0.0331]                           |
| Income covers expenses and can save income covers expenses |  |                                  | base                                |   |
|  | -0.000423<br>[0.00316]                                       | -0.00458<br>[0.0184]             | 3.94E-04<br>[0.000855]              | -0.00272<br>[0.0157]                            |
| some difficulties in covering needs                        | 0.000687<br>[0.00313]  | 0.022<br>[0.0189]                | 4.97E-05<br>[0.000889]              | -0.0011<br>[0.0162]                             |
| significant difficulties in covering needs                 | 0.0015<br>[0.00347]  | 0.00792<br>[0.0206]              | -3.38E-04<br>[0.000974]             | -0.0311*<br>[0.0173]                            |
| Computer   | 0.00619***<br>[0.00220]                                      | 0.00446<br>[0.0129]              | 0.00271***<br>[0.000602]            | -0.0648***<br>[0.0109]                          |
| Being religious  | 0.00419**<br>[0.00189]                                       | 0.00485<br>[0.0113]              | -0.00175***<br>[0.000524]           | 0.0151<br>[0.00954]                             |
| Fixed country effects                                      |  |                                  | yes                                 |   |
| N  |  |                                  | 11,056                              |   |

Source: Arab Barometer, authors' calculation.

Notes: The results are shown for cleaned pooled data without Tunisia and Yemen. \*\*\* Significant at 1%, \*\* at 5% and \* at 10%. Standard errors are in parentheses.

Interestingly that urban residents share more balanced gender view on working outside home for married women than rural residents, but agree more on the statement that men are better political leaders than women. The same inconclusive relationship one may observe with regards to being religious. Religious people are less likely to agree with the statement that married women can work outside home, but agree more on equal rights for men and women in Constitution.

Dummy variable for travelers to Western countries is significant for all gender related statements. Being exposed to Western norms and lifestyle is associated with more balanced gender views in two statements related to equal rights between men and women in constitution and men being better political leaders than women.<sup>2</sup> However, individuals being abroad continue to have traditional views on such gender norms as female working outside home and female university education even though the interaction term for male travelers indicates a shift towards more gender balanced views. A gender bias in favor of men in these norms may persist because these particular norms are associated with the changes in power relationships and men have strong incentives to keep the status quo. In addition, they are associated with easily observable changes in behavior and as a result deviations from these norm are more easily to be punished.

We also test heterogeneity of the impact of traveling on norms depending on the duration of stay in Western countries. We have split duration of stay into three dummy variables. One is for those who did not travel. The second is for those who traveled and stayed less than one month and the third one is for those who traveled and stayed longer than one month. We would expect longer stays to have more prominent impact on shifting labor norms. Empirical evidence supports this hypothesis as can be clearly seen in table 2. Individuals who stayed in Western countries longer than one month are more likely to have gender balanced views on equal gender rights in constitutions and political leadership than those who did not travel. This effect does not hold for those who stayed abroad less than one month.

Table 2. Probit regression explaining heterogeneous impact of traveling to Western countries on gender norms, marginal effects

|                              | Equal rights for men<br>and women in<br>Constitution are<br>important | Men are better<br>political leaders | Married women<br>can work<br>outside home | University<br>education is more<br>important for male |
|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| did not travel               |   |                                     |   |   |
| Spent less than one<br>month | -0.00199<br>[0.00401]   | -0.0327<br>[0.0238]                 | -0.00686<br>[0.0201]                      | -3.8E-05<br>[0.00137]                                 |
| spent more than one<br>month | 0.00634**<br>[0.00321]  | -0.0932***<br>[0.0196]              | 0.00651<br>[0.0161]                       | -0.00138<br>[0.00110]                                 |

Source: Arab Barometer, authors' calculation.

Notes: Results for other controls are not reported for brevity. Full results are available upon request.

Finally, as a robustness check, we have also compared how different the results will be if instead of actual traveling we will use a dummy for those who plan to migrate keeping all controls the same.<sup>3</sup> Obtained coefficients are shown in table 3 and compared to coefficients at traveling dummy in figure 4. In contrast to travelers, potential migrants have more traditional gender views and demonstrate less agreement with

<sup>2</sup> The results hold if we include a dummy variable measuring positive attitude to globalization.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this is an imperfect exercise because many individuals who travelled to Western countries can be just tourists and differ substantially from potential migrants, especially if they plan to migrate to Gulf countries.

statement that equal rights should be promoted in constitution and more agreement with the statement that men are better political leaders than women (the signs of coefficients are different). This can be an indirect indication that gender views of people who actually traveled are different from those who plan to migrate because there have been already exposed to alternative views. Alternatively, people who plan to migrate can be different from those who traveled internationally, especially if they plan to migrate to developing countries.

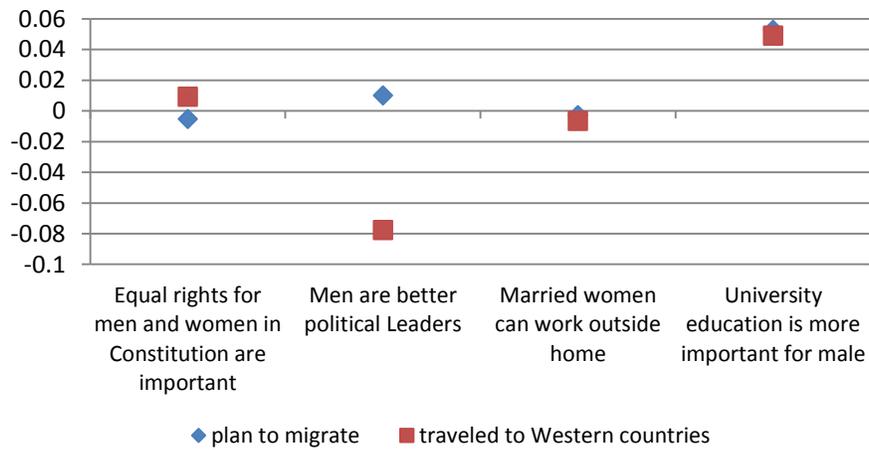
Table 3. Probit regression explaining impact of traveling to Western countries on gender norms, marginal effects

|                             | Equal rights for men and women in Constitution are important | Men are better political leaders | Married women can work outside home | University education is more important for male |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Individual plans to migrate | -0.00529**<br>[0.00218]                                      | 0.0102<br>[0.0127]               | -0.00269***<br>[0.000878]           | 0.0530***<br>[0.0109]                           |

Source: Arab Barometer, authors' calculation.

Notes: Results for other controls are not reported for brevity. Full results are available upon request.

Figure 4. Marginal effects from traveling and plans to migrate dummies across four gender norms



Source: Arab Barometer, authors' calculation.

Notes: marginal effects from probit regressions.

## 5. Conclusions

International travel exposes travelers to the new social context with different beliefs, norms and values. They can transmit new ideas across borders changing institutional environment back home. This paper explored the impact of international travel to Western countries on gender norms among men and women in Middle East and North Africa countries using cross sectional data from the Arab Barometer.

In contrast to many other studies, this paper directly focuses on the direct correlation of travel with gender related norms, while most of other empirical studies explore impact of return migration on gender outcomes such as fertility, employment, political participation and so forth. We also distinguish between short and medium term stay as well as different gender norms measured by four gender statements: i) “do you agree or disagree that a married woman can work outside the home”; ii) “do you agree or disagree that in general, men are better at political leadership than women”; iii) “do you agree or disagree that university education is more important for males than university education for females”; iv) “considering your own country’s constitution, what is the importance of the constitution in insuring equal rights between men and women?”.

Conducted research reveals that being exposed to Western norms and lifestyle is associated with more balanced gender views in two statements related to equal rights between men and women in constitution and men being better political leaders than women. Results hold if we include variable measuring positive attitude to globalization to test robustness to omitted variable bias.

In contrast to the first two statements, individuals being abroad continue to have traditional views on such gender norms as female working outside home and female university education even though the interaction term for male travelers indicates a shift towards more gender balanced views. A gender bias in favor of men in these norms may persist because they are associated with changes in power and men have strong incentives to keep the status quo. This implies that the capacity of international traveling to shift old-fashioned views is limited to a particular set of norms.

In our analysis we have also split the length of stay abroad into three dummy variables. One is for those who did not travel. The second is for those who traveled and stayed less than one month and the third one is for those who traveled and stayed longer than one month. Empirical evidence demonstrates that individuals who stayed in Western countries longer than one month are more likely to have gender balanced views on equal gender rights in constitutions and political leadership than those who did not travel. This effect does not hold for those who stayed abroad less than one month.

Overall, there is some evidence that traveling to countries with more liberal gender views is associated with more balanced gender norms among the travelers, but the positive impact is only found for those who stayed longer than one month and for the norms not directly associated with the change in power relationships.

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