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Male Social Status and Women's Work

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Female labor force participation varies significantly across cultural groups within the same country and among countries with similar levels of economic development (Fernandez and Fogel, 2006). Recent studies have emphasized that cultural values and gender norms – standards describing desirable behavior¹ – are important determinants of women's work (see, for instance, Alesina et al. (2013); Fernandez (2013); Bertrand et al. (2015)).

This literature has focused on how aggregate, community-level attitudes relate to rates of female labor supply. But the impact of community norms on individual work behavior is likely mediated by intra-household dynamics – for example, both men and women could face norms-driven social costs if a wife works. When men and women bear different costs of violating

ing norms, intra-household bargaining will mediate the role that norms play in governing female labor supply. Observational data suggests this may be the case: in 75 of the 76 countries covered by the World Values Survey, women express more support for female labor than men.² Yet the relationships between norms, men and women's personal preferences, and women's actual employment decisions are not well understood.

In this paper, we use data on husbands' and wives' personal beliefs and perceptions of their spouses' and community attitudes to shed light on how norms are internalized, and acted upon, within the household. Our approach is grounded in the idea that norms may differentially impact men and women; for instance, while the community attitude that "households of women who work are bad providers" may make female labor costly for men, it need not be as much of a deterrent for women. Similarly a norm dictating that "good wives stay at home with the children" could be disproportionately costly for women.

Our data are gathered from a setting in which women have limited agency, especially with regards to their engagement with the outside world. Households in our sample live in poor, rural areas of Madhya Pradesh, India. Only 41 percent of women report having traveled to the village market alone in the past year and, in one third of households, women would not be allowed to go unaccompanied to the local health center even in the case of an emergency. Within-household constraints on women's labor supply are strong: 72 per-

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¹Our definition of a social norm follows an approach commonly taken in the psychology literature, where a norm reflects average beliefs held by a group (Becker and Mahoney, 2014; Tushman and Fabick, 2006). Similarly, Alesina and Wacziarg (2007) propose a model in which an individual's identity is defined by the social category – and its corresponding standards for behavior – to which she belongs.

²Field et al. (2017) combine 2014-2016 World Values Survey data and create a standardized index of support for female labor force participation by aggregating responses to four questions on attitudes towards women's work. See their paper for further details of this analysis.

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Female labor force participation varies significantly even among countries with similar levels of economic development. Recent studies have shown that gender norms can help explain these differences in women's work, but the channels through which norms impact women's employment decisions are not well understood. We present novel data on spouses' preferences and perceptions of community attitudes about female labor in rural India and

document associations with female work. We find that the perceived social cost of women's work falls on men and that husbands' opposition to female labor is associated with their wives' lower take-up of employment.

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