



Is University Education More Important for a Boy than for a Girl? Social approval of unequal educational opportunity across 21 countries

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INTRODUCTION

The attitudes that we hold are shaped and nurtured by society, institutions, religion and family; they involve feelings, beliefs and behaviours and represent a form of judgement. These attitudes and values define the power relations, dynamics, opportunities and choices between men and women, boys and girls. Societies vary significantly in the scale of egalitarian attitudes and beliefs related to gender roles and opportunities in education, politics, the family, and the workforce. Progress towards more egalitarian gender values is crucial for achieving gender equality among children and young people, which in turn is a pre-condition for sustainable development (UNICEF, 2010).

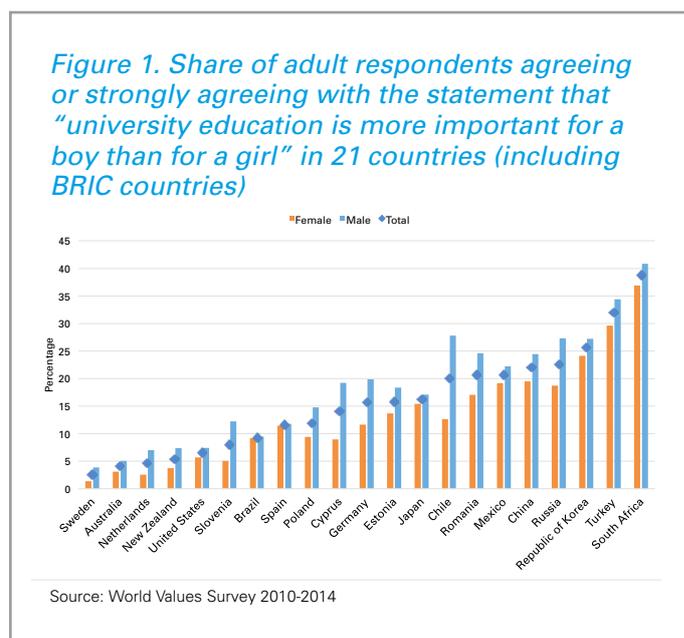
DATA

The analysis of attitudes towards gender preferences regarding university education presented here is based on the World Values Survey (WVS), a global study of socio-cultural change. This is a unique database which consists of nationally representative surveys conducted in over 100 countries over the different survey rounds. It is a time-series investigation of human beliefs, values and motivations of people across a spectrum of developed and developing nations. Respondents were asked if they 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with the following statement: "A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl." The latest data available refers to wave 6 (2010-2014) and wave 5 (2005-2009). The results for wave 6 presented here are based on a sample of 18 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) and three countries recognized as emerging economies – Brazil, China and Russia ('BRIC' countries). In addition, we also pool the sample of 27 countries based on the last two waves of data to investigate the relationship between attitudes and gender gap in university enrolment.

RESULTS

Nordic and English-speaking countries show the most egalitarian attitudes towards university enrolment

Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents in each country agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement in the last round of the survey. Sweden stands out as the country with the most progressive gender attitudes regarding higher education with only 2.6 per cent of the population on average agreeing with the statement. This is in line with other surveys on gender attitudes conducted in 24 countries (YouGOV, 2015), which found Sweden as well as Denmark, Finland, and Norway to be those countries scoring best on attitudes regarding gender equality. Nordic countries also ranked high in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2015),



which measures relative gender gaps in health, education, economics and politics.

English-speaking countries are also highly supportive of equal gender opportunities for higher education with only 4 per cent in Australia, 5.3 per cent in New Zealand, and 6.5 per cent in the United States valuing boys' higher education more than girls'. In contrast, about one in five respondents (20-25 per cent) in Chile, China, Mexico, Romania, and Russia, and one in four in the Republic of Korea (26 per cent) share similar attitudes. Turkey is the country with the least support for gender equality in higher education in this survey, with about 32 per cent of respondents agreeing with the statement. The country is ranked 130 out of 145 countries in the Global Gender Inequality Index and 105 in the gender inequality in Educational Attainment sub-index (World Economic Forum, 2015).

In all countries except Brazil and Spain, male respondents are more supportive of traditional values and preferential opportunities for boys in higher education, based on 2010-2014 data. Yet relatively high levels of female respondents supporting non-egalitarian attitudes points to societal norms that shape these attitudes. Some variations are notable. Countries with a higher level of reported traditional values, such as the Republic of Korea or Turkey, tend to show more uniform responses, or a narrower relative gap between male and female respondents. Brazil and Spain, where there is no significant difference between female and male responses, can be considered exceptions.

Younger respondents tend to hold more gender-egalitarian attitudes

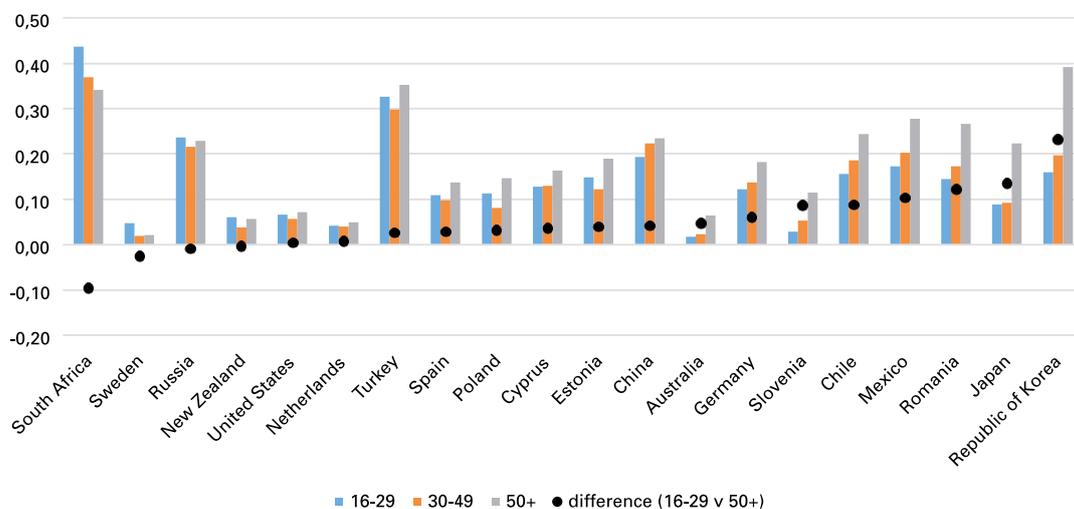
The intergenerational gap between respondents aged 29 or younger and aged 50 or over is largest in Japan, Mexico, Romania, and Republic of Korea (Figure 2). However, the relative difference (measured as ratio) is greatest in Australia and Slovenia, where respondents aged 50 or over are four times more likely to favour boys' education than their counterparts aged 29 or younger, although the overall rates are low in both age groups. One country – South Africa – shows the opposite pattern: older respondents are significantly less likely to agree that university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.

Egalitarian attitudes tend to progress with economic development supported by a democratization process

Attitudes towards more traditional or more egalitarian gender roles vary systematically according to the level of national wealth and economic progress, but their roots can be found in the cultural legacy of societies or their social structure (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Thus, change in gender attitudes and values can typically be associated with a broader economic, social, political and cultural change in societies accompanied by the process of democratization (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart, Norris and Welzel, 2002).

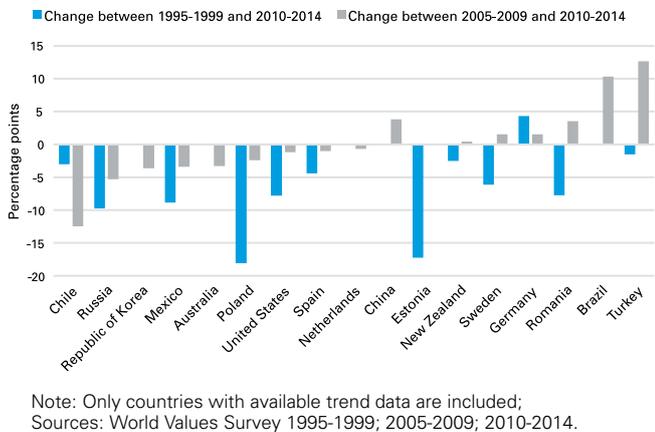
Figure 3 shows that countries with the largest reduction in traditional gender attitudes – Estonia and Poland – are those that experienced the most rapid socio-economic transformation between 1995/1999 and 2010/2014, as a

Figure 2. Absolute (percentage point) differences in the shares of adult respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that "university education is more important for a boy than for a girl" by age group in 20 countries



Note: Countries are sorted by difference between age groups. No valid age group data for Brazil. Source: World Values Survey 2010-2014.

Figure 3. Change in attitudes towards gender equality in higher education in countries with available time series data



non-linear path to democratization. The trend in China and particularly in Brazil, both of which show an increase in non-egalitarian attitudes over the most recent period, rings an alarm however, as it suggests that rapid economic growth is not sufficient to change entrenched societal norms.

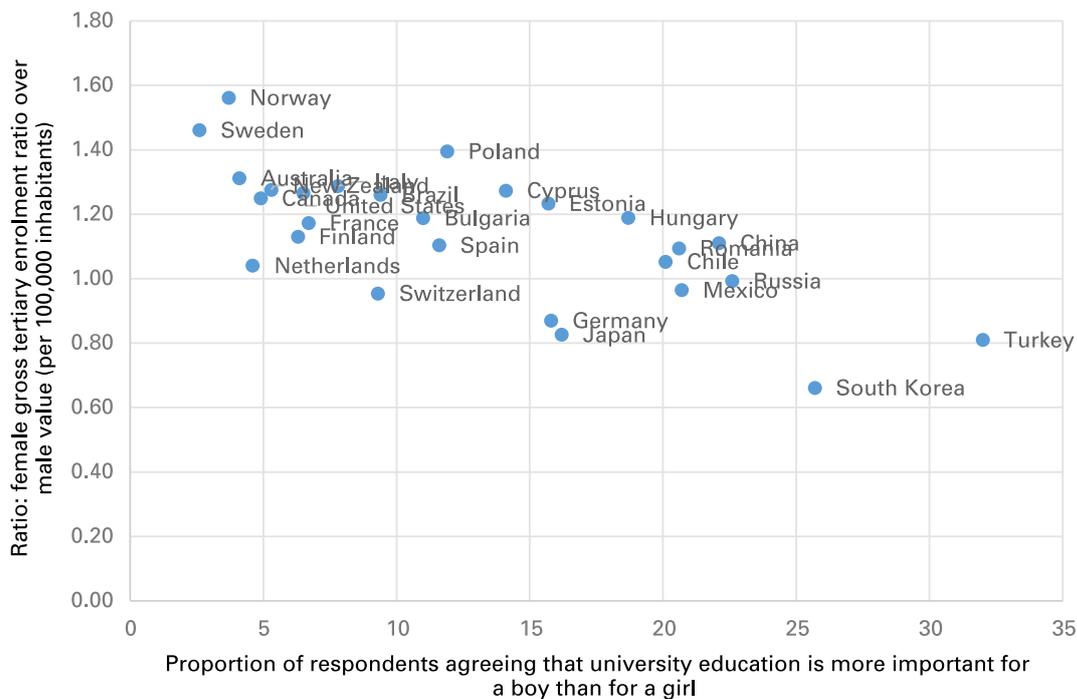
Attitudes matter for gender-equal outcomes

The extent to which attitudes and expressed values correspond to actual gender inequality in outcomes – i.e. the relative tertiary participation gap in the countries surveyed – is the focus of Figure 4. On average, we find a strong negative relationship between them (Pearson Correlation= -0.70, $p < 0.01$). Countries with higher rates of support for gender-equal opportunities in higher education tend to have a gross enrolment ratio above 1, which implies higher female enrolment. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden are among countries with the most progressive attitudes and highest relative proportion of girls and young women in higher education. The Republic of Korea and Turkey, which have some of the most traditional attitudes, showed some of the widest relative gaps in tertiary enrolment in favour of boys and young men.

Some disconnect between values and reality is apparent for countries with a diverse socio-cultural legacy and

part of the post-socialist transition. This supports the hypothesis of change in attitude influenced by the process of economic development and democratization. The change in Russia, which has undergone similar structural reforms, has not been as dramatic, possibly due to its

Figure 4. Attitudes towards gender equality in higher education vs. female gross tertiary enrolment ratio over male value (per 100,000 inhabitants). Pooled data from waves 5 and 6, World Values Survey



Source: World Values Survey 2010-2014; 2005-2009; UNESCO Institute for Statistics Education Indicators database, 2014 or latest data available. Data for Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Norway and Switzerland, refer to wave 5 (2005-2009) with university enrolment data corresponding to 2009 values.

uneven path of development. Chile, China, Romania and Russia achieve gender parity in enrolment alongside strong support for traditional gender roles. More research can help to understand the specific interactions between gender norms and educational policies and provisions in these countries, as well as the converging or diverging paths between norms and policy.

CONCLUSION

Societal attitudes that reinforce gender inequality in higher education are strongly associated with a lower relative share of female university enrolment. Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States, match egalitarian attitudes towards higher education with a lower gender gap in enrolment. Other countries such as the Republic of Korea and Turkey face the double challenge of addressing gender-biased attitudes and reaching gender parity in higher education.

The attitudes are nurtured by wide-ranging gender inequalities in the labour market, political life, or gender roles entrenched within the family environment. Thus, changing attitudes and beliefs with respect to values placed on boys' and girls' education cannot be addressed without first ensuring that the market provides gender-equal rewards for similar outcomes. Matching greater support for egalitarian attitudes towards girls and young women with non-discriminating policies and institutions will ensure the sustainability of renewed development progress.

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This brief has undergone the internal peer review process of the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

