Attitudes Toward Gender Equality: A Multilevel Analysis

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1 Introduction

This paper aims to explore the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gender equality.

Over the past decades, women's participation in the labor market has increased significantly across Western societies (EUROSTAT). Prior to the 1990s, men dominated tertiary education in both enrollment and completion rates (Kelly & Slaughter 1991). However, since the 1980s, women have not only reached parity with men in many fields of study but, in some cases, have even surpassed them (Buchmann et al. 2008). As a result, women have progressed within professional hierarchies, attaining higher positions in firms and even assuming leadership roles.

This paper critically examines the assumption that employment exposure necessarily fosters greater support for gender equality. This assumption is questioned despite the increased economic independence and heightened awareness of persistent discrimination that employment may bring (Klein 1984, Lestaghe 2010). Moreover, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence within gendered class structures (1998), this study seeks to demonstrate that this relationship is inevitably shaped by the nature of one's occupation, particularly in terms of occupational prestige, which serves as a moderating factor. For instance, research suggests that women in positions of power may align themselves with capitalist ideologies typically associated with male-dominated leadership structures. This phenomenon can be analyzed through Bourdieu's theoretical framework on the internalization and legitimization of dominant class ideologies (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 1998).

Furthermore, existing literature highlights how national contexts, particularly welfare regime clustering, influence individual attitudes through policy frameworks and economic conditions. Northern European countries tend to exhibit a more inclusive and gender-equal approach (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 2009), whereas Continental and Southern European nations rely more on family-based caregiving (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996), reinforcing traditional gender roles. In contrast, liberal welfare states display higher levels of inequality

driven by income disparities, while antipodean countries follow a similar pattern but with slightly better gender equality outcomes (Castels & Mitchell 1993, Esping-Andersen 1990).

The five countries selected for analysis—Sweden, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and New Zealand—represent distinct welfare state models and serve as proxies for these classifications. These nations were chosen based on Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology of Western welfare regimes, later refined by Castles and Mitchell (1998) to include radical (Antipodean) contexts and further expanded by Ferrera (1996) to account for Southern European models.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- **(a)** What is the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gender equality?

- **(b)** Does this relationship vary across different welfare regimes?

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, a theoretical framework is presented to support the study's rationale, incorporating previous research on the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gender equality. This section also introduces the interaction between employment and occupational type, as well as additional variables relevant to this relationship, such as education level, migrant status, and age, while accounting for cross-national differences.

Next, the methodological approach is outlined, detailing the selected variables and analytical strategies. Finally, the results are discussed, followed by the study's conclusions, which include a discussion of limitations and implications for future research.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Attitudes Toward Gender Equality

The literature on gender studies presents significant disagreements regarding the definition and conceptualization of gender equality. McDaniel (2008) argues that gender equality is generally understood in terms of parity in the public domain or in roles within the private sphere. However, O'Brien et al. (2019) emphasize that gender equality can be examined across multiple settings and dimensions. As illustrated in Figure 1, this study focuses on attitudes toward gender equality in the workplace, following the classification proposed by O'Brien et al. (2019).

Attitudes toward gender equality are crucial since they influence social actors' behaviors and interactions (McDaniel 2008). The literature provides numerous examples of how gender egalitarianism affects social dynamics. For instance, it has been shown to reduce gender disparities in domestic labor by either decreasing the amount of work performed by women (Bianchi et al. 2000) or increasing men's participation in household tasks (Cunningham 2001). Furthermore, in the labor market, more egalitarian attitudes correlate with greater approval of working women and positive perceptions of non-traditional female work roles (Thornton 1989).
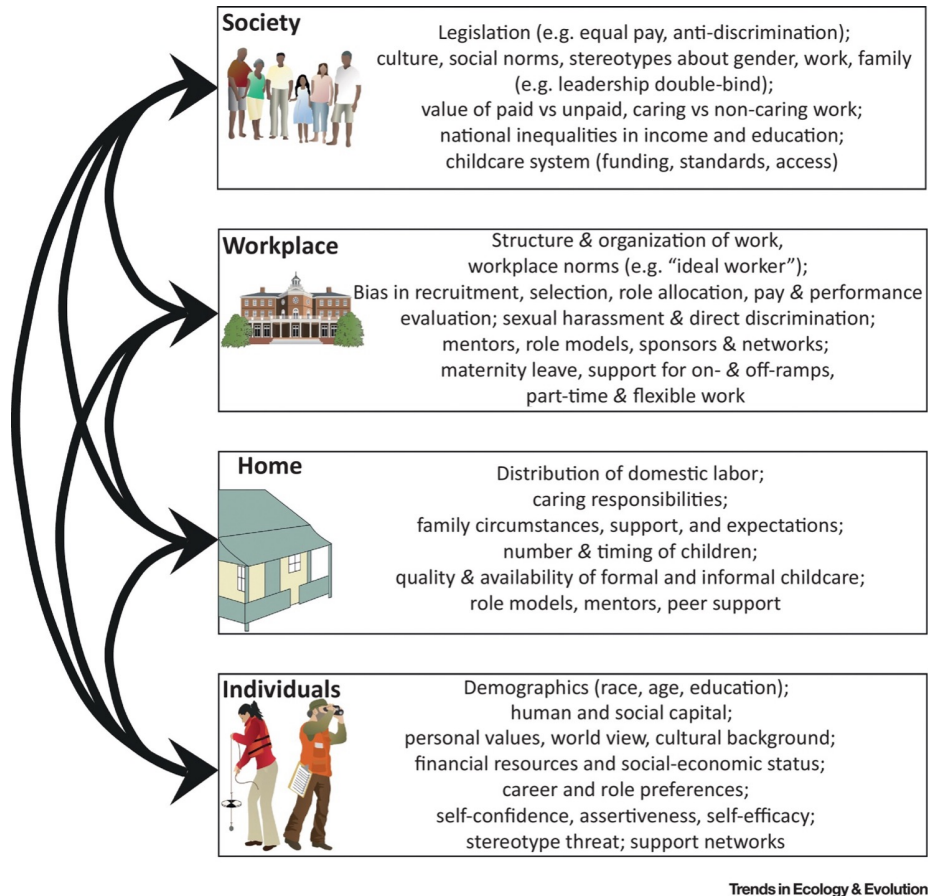
Figure 1: Dimensions of Gender Equality in Science (O'Brien et al. 2019)

Gender egalitarianism also plays a role in social mobility. Research indicates that parents with more progressive views on gender equality are less likely to make unequal educational investments in their sons and daughters (Dryler 1998, Thornton et al. 1983). Consequently, women, on average, tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward gender equality than men.

Hypothesis 1: Women will hold more favorable attitudes toward gender equality across all selected countries.

2.2 Women and Employment Status

A substantial body of literature highlights that the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) brought a significant shift in societal values and norms, leading to the increased participation of women in the labor market. This transformation contributed to the de-standardization of the traditional family life course in

Western democracies, characterized by declining fertility rates and a more egalitarian gender perspective (Van de Kaa 1987, Lesthaeghe 2010). Research has established that as women entered the workforce, they also gained greater representation in the political sphere, thereby promoting more egalitarian roles, both in the United States (Brewster & Padavic 2000, Thornton & Young-DeMarco 2001, Bolzendahl & Myers 2004, Brooks & Bolzendahl 2004, Cotter et al. 2011) and worldwide (Stier et al. 2001, Breen & Cooke 2005, Pettit & Hook 2005, Dorius & Firebaugh 2010, Charles 2011).

Beyond mere labor force participation, employment status itself plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward gender egalitarianism. Despite progress, high-ranking positions in business and government remain predominantly occupied by men (Hoyt 2010). Consequently, women in leadership roles often find themselves in male-dominated environments, which may lead them to internalize prevailing masculine norms.

Hypothesis 2: Higher levels of employment will be associated with less favorable attitudes toward gender equality among women across all selected countries.

2.3 The Role of Education, Age, and Immigrant Status

The relationship between gender and attitudes toward gender equality is shaped by multiple factors. Several studies demonstrate that higher education fosters more egalitarian attitudes by exposing individuals to progressive ideas and challenging traditional gender stereotypes (Boehnke 2011, Bolzendahl & Myers 2004, Thornton et al. 1983).

Age also plays a crucial role, with older individuals tending to hold more traditional views on gender roles compared to younger cohorts (Thornton & Freedman 1979). Cohort-based studies further indicate that differences in life experiences serve as strong predictors of gender role attitudes (Lynott & McCandless 2000).

Immigrant status represents another relevant factor, as cultural and institutional contexts shape gender role perceptions. Research shows that gender role attitudes vary between native-born individuals and immigrants, depending on the host country's social and institutional framework (Blau et al. 2011, Dale et al. 2006, Fernández & Fogli 2009). Breidahl & Larsen (2016) found that immigrants tend to adopt the gender norms of their host countries.

2.4 Cross-Country Differences and Economic Development

As Boehnke (2001) highlights, gender attitudes are influenced by structural, individual, and socio-cultural factors. One useful framework for understanding these differences is the classification of welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990, Castles & Mitchell 1993, Ferrera 1996). Nordic countries, characterized by strong social assistance programs, exhibit the most progressive gender policies. In contrast, liberal and radical welfare regimes place greater responsibility on market outcomes, often exacerbating gender inequality.

Another key indicator of economic development is GDP per capita, as higher levels of human capital are associated with increased economic prosperity. Studies conducted by supranational organizations (EIB, EIGE 2017, INAPP 2018) reveal a strong correlation between economic growth and gender equality. Countries with higher GDP levels tend to adopt policies aligned with those of Western nations, leading to more favorable attitudes toward gender equality among their populations.

Hypothesis 3: Higher GDP per capita will be associated with more favourable attitudes toward gender equality across all selected countries.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data

This analysis utilizes data from the European Values Study and the World Values Survey, both of which are large-scale, cross-national, and repeated cross-sectional research programs. These organizations collaborated on joint data collection in 2017, with country-specific surveys conducted between 2017 and 2021. The countries selected for this study are Denmark, Italy, Germany, and New Zealand. After data cleaning, the analytical sample consists of 5,844 observations, with respondents ranging in age from 18 to over 82 years. However, the data provided by the World Values Survey (2022) do not offer sufficient granularity to comprehensively address these questions. Consequently, working hours (differentiating between full-time and part-time employment) and employment type (employed, self-employed, or unemployed) will be used as proxies for occupational prestige.

3.2 Variables

Figure 2 presents the distribution of the items used to construct the dependent variable, in which it is possible to see that the observations are skewed towards disagreement.
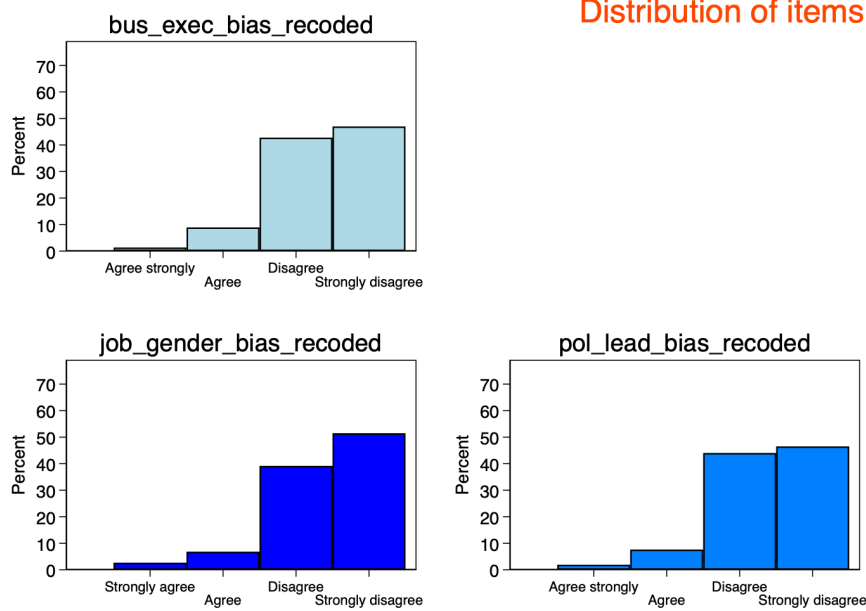
Figure 2: Distribution of items used to construct the dependent variable.

The dependent variable (Y), "Attitudes toward Gender Equality," is constructed using the following items: "Jobs scarce: Men should have more right to a job than women" and "Men make better business executives than women do." Respondents rated each item on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree), where higher scores indicate lower levels of gender-biased attitudes.

The main independent variable (X) is "Gender" (0 = Male; 1 = Female).

At the individual level, the variable "Employment Status of Respondent" is included as a moderator (Z), while also being examined for its direct effect on Y. The survey categorizes employment status based on working hours (more than 30 hours or part-time), self-employment, and unpaid work (if unemployed).

At the macro level, the gross effect of GDP per capita on attitudes toward gender equality is analyzed to capture cross-country differences. GDP per capita is widely recognized as a key indicator of a country's economic performance. Using World Bank (2022) data, GDP per capita values for each country of interest were extracted, using 2019 figures. To enhance interpretability, GDP per capita is reported in billions of dollars.

Finally, several control variables are included: "Educational Level" (1 = Lower Education; 2 = Middle Education; 3 = Higher Education); "Age" (1 = Under 30, 2 = 30–44, 3 = 45–64, 4 = Over 65), categorized into four cohorts

to account for possible non-linear effects; and "Immigrant" status (0 = Born in country; 1 = Immigrant).

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all key variables.

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Gender Attitudes	5844	0.02	0.834	-3.388	0.867
Gender	6958	0.496	0.5	0	1
Employment Status	6831	4.309	3.739	1	9
Age Category	6958	2.915	0.885	1	4
Education Level	6958	2.104	0.686	1	3
Immigrant Status	6958	0.113	0.317	0	1
GDP (billions, USD)	6958	2249.369	1857.701	252.18	4525.7

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for key variables.

4 Analytical Strategy

To construct the dependent variable, a factor analysis was performed on the three selected items. To test the hypotheses, stepwise multilevel linear probability models are employed. Multilevel modeling is particularly suitable for this study, given the hierarchical structure of the data, where respondents are nested within countries. Consequently, individuals residing in the same country are expected to exhibit similarities in their responses.

5 Results

The factor analysis results, illustrated in Figure 3, confirm that all selected items capture the same underlying dimension. The analysis identifies a single factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1, which is referred to as "Attitudes toward Gender Equality." The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test yields a score of 0.64, indicating an almost acceptable sampling adequacy, while Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 suggests good reliability, justifying the use of this factor in the analysis.
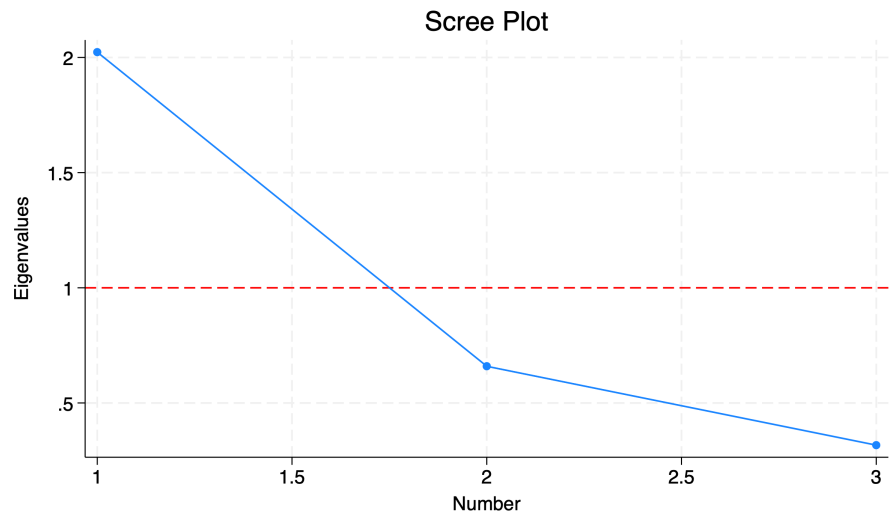
Figure 3: Screeplot of the factor analysis.

Table 2 presents the results of the multilevel linear probability models, estimating the variance in scores at both the individual and country levels.

	(Model 0)	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)
Scores for Attitudes towards Gender Equality				
Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female)		0.277***	0.334***	0.334***
		(0.0215)	(0.0311)	(0.0311)
Part time (less than 30 hours a week)			0.0794	0.0949
			(0.0828)	(0.0831)
Self employed			-0.116*	-0.117*
			(0.0529)	(0.0529)
No paid work			-0.00335	-0.00335
			(0.0412)	(0.0412)
Female # Part time (less than 30 hours a week)			-0.147	-0.162
			(0.0932)	(0.0934)
Female # Self employed			0.222*	0.223*
			(0.0898)	(0.0897)
Female # No paid work			-0.188***	-0.188***
			(0.0472)	(0.0472)
Immigrant			-0.198***	-0.194***
			(0.0341)	(0.0341)
Adult (30-44)			0.0774	0.0890
			(0.0454)	(0.0481)
Middle aged (45-64)			0.0524	0.0594
			(0.0428)	(0.0462)
Older (65+)			-0.140**	-0.178**
			(0.0480)	(0.0593)
Middle education			0.216***	0.212***
			(0.0309)	(0.0309)
High education			0.406***	0.404***
			(0.0336)	(0.0337)
GDP (in billions, USD)				-0.0000387
				(0.0000392)
Constant	-0.0338	-0.178	-0.366***	-0.294**
	(0.101)	(0.0989)	(0.0936)	(0.113)
Observations	5844	5844	5752	5752
ICC	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.2

Table 2: Multilevel Regression Models with ICC

Firstly, the null model,which includes only the dependent variable, in the multilevel analyses, estimates the ICC. The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) is a measure that detects the extent to which observations in the same country are similar or differ from each other. The given value of 0.05 indicates that only 5% of the variation in gender attitudes is accountable to in betweness country-level differences, while 95% of the variation is explained by the individual level, suggesting that micro-level factors are the primary drivers.

Nonetheless, 5 % of variation in between country-level difference suggests that the analysis needs to be structured in a hierarchical fashion.

In Model 1, gender is introduced as a fixed effect to capture its gross effect on the dependent variable. The findings support the first hypothesis: with a coefficient of 0.277, females exhibit significantly more favorable attitudes toward gender equality compared to males.

Model 2 incorporates employment status and other individual-level variables as fixed effects. Contrary to expectations, the second hypothesis is only partially supported. Employment status does influence attitudes toward gender equality, but self-employed women display significantly more favorable attitudes than fully employed women (coefficient = 0.222). However, part-time employment does not yield a significant difference compared to full-time employment.

Interestingly, females involved in non-paid work show a significant negative association (coefficient = -0.188). However, this could be inflated by the age of the respondents in this category, since women in this age group might have internalized more patriarchal values, given the possibility of being socialized in a more patriarchal and traditional society.

At the individual level, the control variables indicate that, for both genders, higher levels of education are associated with significantly more favorable attitudes toward gender equality. Compared to individuals with lower education levels, those with middle and higher education attainments exhibit coefficients of 0.216 and 0.406, respectively. Furthermore, immigrants show significantly lower support for gender equality compared to native-born individuals (coefficient = -0.198). Regarding age, individuals aged 65 and older display significantly lower support for gender equality than younger respondents (coefficient = -0.140).

Finally, Model 3 examines the gross impact of GDP per capita on gender equality. These findings contradict the hypothesis, since the coefficient of GDP which is -0.0000387, so negative, but non-significant. This suggests that GDP per capita does not predict gender equality attitudes in this analysis, net of controls.

6   Conclusions and Discussion

The objective of this paper was to examine the assumption that employment exposure fosters greater support for gender equality. By drawing on Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence within gendered class structures (1977, 1998), this study aimed to explore the strength of this relationship, specifically analyzing the moderating effect of employment levels.

Furthermore, this assumption was critically assessed while acknowledging recent economic and social advancements made by women (Klein 1984, Lesthaeghe 2010, Van De Kaa 1987).

Lastly, using a proxy based on five different countries, the study investigated variations in attitudes toward gender equality across different welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990, Ferrera 1996, Mitchell 1998). Given that reducing the gender gap contributes to long-term GDP per capita growth (Ghosh 2020), it

was expected that countries with higher GDP levels would exhibit more positive attitudes. However, the results only partially confirmed these expectations. The findings indicate a positive association between gender and attitudes toward gender equality, supporting the first hypothesis.

Moreover, introducing an individual-level interaction between gender and employment status revealed an interesting pattern. The relationship was significant only for self-employed women, showing a positive association, whereas it was negative for unpaid female workers. Consequently, as significance was found exclusively in "marginal" employment categories and not among part-time or fully employed women, the second hypothesis was rejected. This analysis does not provide evidence that an increase in employment status necessarily leads to more positive attitudes toward gender equality.

Similarly, the third hypothesis was also rejected, as GDP per capita was not a significant predictor, indicating no meaningful cross-country differences in attitudes toward gender equality.

Further research should explore the self-employed and unpaid worker categories in greater depth to uncover the nuanced dynamics within these groups.

This study has several limitations. First, employment status was measured using a proxy—hours worked—rather than a more refined metric. Future research should address this issue by employing a more comprehensive employment prestige scale that captures the diverse roles and statuses of female workers.

Additionally, this study focuses solely on Western societies, limiting its generalizability. Future research should investigate these relationships in non-Western contexts to identify cross-national and within-country variations, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the examined variables alone are insufficient to explain the complexity of the relationship.

In conclusion, this study highlights a significant finding: the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gender equality is not uniform across individuals, despite the general progressiveness of Western countries. Moreover, this relationship may partly depend on the paid/unpaid employment status of female workers, warranting further investigation.

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