The significantly lower labour market participation rate of women is to a larger extent driven by institutionalized gender bias and discrimination, which shifts the balance between personal preferences, socio-economic constraints and gender norm conformity towards less participation for women. For instance, a recent study focusing on European countries [Christiansen, L. E., 2016. *Individual Choice or Policies? Drivers of Female Employment in Europe*. International Monetary Fund.] reveals that the attitude of women on working outside the household is a strong predictor of their employment, but also that socio-economic constraints such as education, children, income or tax systems additionally play a significant role. Globally, countries with very low or high per-capita income tend to have higher female participation rates, indicating the importance of economic necessity as a driver for participation in poor countries.

This paper estimates the probability for a women to participate in the labour market by using survey data and taking relevant interaction terms into account. It expands the literature in two important dimensions. First, by using the 2016 Gallup World Poll, an immensely rich dataset covering 149,000 adults in 142 countries, this is to our knowledge the first paper to study the labour force participation of women across all income and cultural groups. Second, it utilizes new indicators of personal preferences, societal gender norms and socio-economic constraints developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and administered in the survey to specifically capture the three driving influences on women’s participation.

The paper finds that women facing more traditional gender norms in their environment have lower labour force participation. Specifically, these are women in relationships or in rural communities, in households whose members lack acceptability for women working outside the home, and of certain religion or cultural groups. Contrastingly, the preference for paid work by women significantly increases their participation rate, the more so when household members also show acceptance for women working outside the home. Interestingly, the paper discovers that the marginal positive impact of preferences on participation is larger for women that a priori face more constraining gender norms. Either women who have a preference for work might face less restrictive gender norms than indicated by available control variables, or they lean strongly against the wind.

The paper identifies a whole range of socio-economic constraints affecting women’s decision to participate in the labour force. First and foremost, women in households facing difficulties to provide for food and shelter participate more despite their personal preferences and the gender norms they face. Additionally, women’s perception of their own labour market opportunities as well as their optimism in life influences their decision to participate. Furthermore, abuse, harassment or discrimination as well as the lack of transportation has a severe negative impact in developing and emerging countries. Higher education tends to be related to higher participation, although this is both likely due to the higher economic benefits of work arising with education and the multidimensional gender norms women face that enables their pursuit for higher education. Despite the higher burden of childcare that falls on women, their labour force participation rate when having children is only slightly lower than without, highlighting the double burden of both paid and unpaid work that many women bear.

To conclude, this paper quantifies the trade-offs between personal preferences, socio-economic inequalities and gender norms that shape women’s decision to participate in the labour market. These findings contribute a multidimensional analysis for policy makers to better identify the policy levers needed to be pulled in order to achieve targets that are most relevant today.