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World Development Vol. 99, pp. 28–41, 2017

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.07.002

Women's Worldwide Education–employment Connection: A Multilevel Analysis of the Moderating Impact of Economic, Political, and Cultural Contexts

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Summary. — Education is a core driver of female employment and empowerment all over the world. As development studies have shown, the strength of this educational effect however varies considerably across countries. Theoretically, we employ mechanisms from human capital theory and modernization theory that explicate the education–employment link. Next, insights from the gender and development approach lead us to hypothesize how economic, political, and socio-cultural features of countries might moderate this effect of educational attainment. Using World Values Survey data on women surveyed in 139 country–year combinations, we empirically test whether and how a country's labor market structure, social policy, and gender norms condition the influence of women's education attainment on employment. Employing multilevel logistic regression models with cross-level interactions, our results indicate that in countries where service sector jobs are relatively scarce, having a higher education is more important for women to get a job; it seems that highereducated women push lowereducated women out of employment under those circumstances. Most importantly, women's educational attainment makes more of a difference in countries with conservative gender norms; in these countries women's employment is considerably lower than in more liberal countries, but to a lesser extent for higher educated women.

Key words — education, employment, women, gender and development, gender norms, institutions

1. INTRODUCTION

Around the world policy efforts to augment women's educational attainment play a major role in the promotion of women's employment and empowerment (see Kabeer, 2017; Pickbourn & Ndikumana, 2016; Pradhan, Singh, & Mitra, 2015; Sperling & Winthrop, 2015). And indeed, multiple studies have shown that an increase in women's education tends to go hand in hand with rising female labor force participation (e.g., Fagan, Rubery, & Smith, 1999; Inglehart, 1997; Lincove, 2008; Van Gils & Kraaykamp, 2008; Samarakoon & Parinduri, 2015). However, this is not universally the case and education's role differs across contexts (Pradhan *et al.*, 2015; Spierings, 2015). For instance, for India, Iran, and Turkey, female education levels have risen but women's employment remained relatively low (Dildar, 2015; İlkkaracan, 2012; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016; Majbouri, 2016). This raises the important question of what conditions might affect the relationship between women's educational attainment and their employment.

This issue echoes insights from the existing development literature that women's employment is strongly influenced by national contexts (see for example Çağatay & Özler, 1995; Meyer, 2003; Pampel & Tanaka, 1986; Tzannatos, 1999), and a few more recent studies that stress the context dependency of the impact of factors conducive to women's employment (see for example Miles, 2002; Huisman & Smits, 2009; Pettit & Hook, 2005; Spierings, Smits, & Verloo, 2010). But this has not been studied systematically for the education–employment connection.

Prior studies have provided relevant information that helped to get a grasp on this issue, but research is rather limited and often restricted to a certain region (e.g. Blossfeld, Skopek, Triventi, & Buchholz, 2015; Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, 1993; Spierings *et al.*, 2010; Spierings, 2015; Steiber, Berghammer, & Haas, 2016). Such regional studies mainly delivered in-depth knowledge referring to specific explanations for countries and/or regions. Accordingly, from these studies it is impossible to assess the impact of factors that differ between countries, geographic areas, and continents (e.g., welfare states, political regimes, and wealth). For that reason, it remains an open question to what extent outcomes from these studies refer to more systematic processes.

Theoretically, existing comparative studies mostly explore the link between women's educational attainment and employment using insights from human capital theory, focussing on the role of institutions and policy, or paying specific attention to the influence of societal norms. Yet, more regionally or locally grounded ethnographic studies have shown that these various factors are interrelated when it comes to the education–employment connection for women (see for example Miles, 2002; Niven, Faggian & Ruwanpura, 2013). In our article we try to connect different theoretical traditions of research, and do so starting from the gender and development (GAD) perspective (Rathgeber, 1990) that presumes that a country's political, structural, and cultural context likely shapes the gendered impact of social and economic development.

In our use of the gender and development (GAD) perspective, we integrate theoretical mechanisms from human capital and modernization theory, and moreover, theorize *how* and *why* the link between women's educational attainment and employment differs as a results of countries' economic, political, and socio-cultural features. As such, the insights derived

* We thank the editors and reviewers for their useful comments to prior versions of this study, which was not funded by external sources. Final revision accepted: July 3, 2017.

from this study not only relate to the education–employment linkage, but feed back into core debates in development studies by showing how and why modernization trajectories are not linear (see Spierings, 2015; Tzannatos, 1999), in what way culture shape development processes (see Lincove, 2008; Pradhan *et al.*, 2015) and how labor market structures are crucial for understanding employment dynamics (see Dildar, 2015; Radchenko, 2017).

Regarding a country's economic qualities, we expect that relative scarcity of service sector jobs will lead to a stronger impact of educational attainment for women, because labor market competition then leads to an increased preference for higher educated women. Concerning public policy, we expect that in countries with more generous welfare state regimes particularly lower educated women are less inclined to look for employment as it is generally presumed they are often pushed to the labor market out of poverty. Finally, in the cultural domain we expect that in countries with conservative gender norms the least empowered women are withheld from seeking employment. Likely, this refers to lower educated women, stressing the emancipatory role of attaining education in more traditional countries. All in all, this study tries to answer the following question: *To what extent do economic, political, and socio-cultural features of countries moderate the effect of women's educational attainment on their employment?*

We investigate this question employing information from the World Values Survey (WVS) data on 50,269 women from 139 surveys encompassing 74 countries. The WVS data allow us to assess the education–employment linkage in various developing and developed countries. Additional data, gathered from World Bank, OECD, and Social Security Administration, are used to measure the contextual economic, political, and socio-cultural features of the 74 countries in various years. Logistic multilevel models with cross-level interaction effects are estimated to test our expectations. The main advancement of this study is thus twofold: (1) it systematically theorizes and empirically investigates the contextdependency of the education–employment linkage for women across the globe and (2) consequently it provides important insight into the interrelatedness of cultural, economic, and political factors in shaping non-linear development trajectories.

2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

(a) *The connection between educational attainment and employment for women*

It is generally acknowledged that girls' educational attainment is conducive to being employed later in life (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2015; Spierings, 2015; Van der Lippe & Van Dijk, 2002). A thorough understanding of the mechanisms that lay behind this education–employment linkage is a prerequisite for theorizing how country contexts moderate this relationship. From the literature two mechanisms stand out.

First, notions of human capital state that education leads to the achievement of human capital (cognitive, economic, social, cultural). Consequently higher educated women are considered to be more attractive to employers given perceptions of higher productivity (Becker, 1993; Blossfeld *et al.*, 2015) and therefore these women more often occupy prestigious and better paid positions that demand specific skills and knowledge. As a result, the benefits (salary, status) of entering employment are larger for higher educated women, making it more likely for them to be actively engaged at the labor market. Actually, it has been argued in human capital theory that when a woman enters paid employment, this leads to additional household costs, such as those of outsourcing childcare and housekeeping, which are not covered by the monetary benefits from employment in unskilled labor tied to primary education (Becker, 1993).

In a second branch of literature, cultural values of having education are emphasized. These value-oriented studies argue that education socializes people in more modern and open-minded ways of thinking (Hyman & Wright, 1979; Inglehart, 1997). From this follows that lower and higher educated women develop different average stances toward being gainfully employed (Steiber *et al.*, 2016). Higher education tends to place emphasis on autonomy, self-enhancement, and a critical attitude toward authority. Therefore, women who attained higher education are more likely to regard employment as an important part of a fulfilling life than lower education women are on average. Also, the are expected to feel somewhat less pressured to act in accordance with patriarchal social norms. For lower educated women on the other hand are said to internalize conservative social norms more and conform to them, and will on average find less fulfillment in employment as they are more constricted to lower quality labor in poorer working conditions (Chau, 2016; Kabeer, 2017; Pradhan *et al.*, 2015)—although financial household needs might overwrite these value-based mechanisms (Spierings, 2015).

(b) *Moderation of the education–employment connection: a country's economic structure, welfare policy, and social norms*

Theoretical considerations on the education–employment link for women above are formulated in universal terms. Debates in development studies, however, have sufficiently argued that contexts matter in shaping more precise considerations of women in their decision to enroll in employment (Besamusca, Tijdens, Keune, & Steinmetz, 2015; Spierings, 2015; Steiber & Haas, 2012). More particularly, the gender and development (GAD) approach draws our attention to a more holistic perspective, taking the economic, political, and socio-cultural context into account (Rathgeber, 1990). By applying this perspective to women's education–employment link, we aim to theorize on how contextual characteristics moderate the impact of education attainment on women's employment. To our knowledge our study is the first systematic investigation that performs such an effort. Below we will discuss three moderating characteristics referring to a country's economic, political, and social features. Within each domain, our selection is guided by (parts of) mechanisms suggested in prior ethnographic and small-scale comparative studies. We summarize our expectations in a conceptual model displayed in Figure 1.

(c) *Economic domain: relative scarcity of service sector jobs*

From human capital theory it follows that for women's employment the availability of jobs matters, and particularly the number of jobs in a country's service sector (Besamusca *et al.*, 2015; İlkkaracan, 2012; Pampel & Tanaka, 1986; Nieuwenhuis, Need, & Van Der Kolk, 2012; Spierings, 2015); women are found to generally prefer working in this sector as it is considered more appropriate and offers better working conditions for women (Bahramitash, 2002; Miles, 2002; Niven, Faggian, & Ruwanpura, 2013; Pradhan *et al.*, 2015; Spierings, 2015). Then when women compete over such jobs, highereducated women are more likely to win this competition; their surplus of human capital makes them more desirable for employers, whereas in times of scarcity of jobs