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Gender and preferences at a young age: Evidence from Armenia[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We look at gender differences in competitiveness, risk preferences and altruism in a large sample of children and adolescents aged 7–16 in Armenia. Post-Soviet Armenia has few formal barriers to gender equality but is also characterized by a patrilineal kinship system and traditional gender roles. In contrast to research conducted in Western countries, we find that girls increase their performance more than boys in response to competition in a running task. We find no gender differences in the other three tasks we explore: skipping rope, a mathematical task, and a verbal task. We also find no difference in the willingness to compete in either the mathematical or the verbal task. In line with previous research, we find that boys are less altruistic and more risk taking than girls, and that the latter gap appears around the age of puberty.

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1. Introduction

Gender differences in economic preferences related to competitiveness, risk taking and pro-sociality are often brought forward as potential explanations to differences in economic choices and outcomes. While the literature shows that women are on average less competitive, less risk taking and more altruistic than men (see e.g., [Eckel and Grossman, 2008a,b](#); [Croson and Gneezy, 2009](#); [Bertrand, 2010](#); [Engel, 2011](#)), most of this research has been conducted on Western college students.

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A growing body of literature highlights the importance of studying different cultures, age groups and contexts in order to give us a more nuanced picture of gender differences in preferences, and their underlying mechanisms (e.g., Gneezy et al., 2009; Cardenas et al., 2012; Andersen et al., 2013). We report results from an experiment conducted among children and adolescents in Armenia, a developing country, on gender differences in preferences for competition, risk and altruism. Post-Soviet Armenia is today characterized by few formal barriers to gender equality. During the Soviet era female education and labor force participation was encouraged, mutual consent for marriage was implemented, and women's right to own land was established. However, the period since independence in 1991 has been described as a "slow return to patriarchy" (Kaser, 2008). Patriarchal norms and an unequal patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system favor boys over girls.¹ Despite the lack of formal barriers to equality, Armenia ranks 94th out of 136 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report of 2013 (Hausmann et al., 2013), with particularly low gender equality for health, survival and political empowerment. At the same time, the equality in educational attainment lies among the top 30 countries included in the report. For example, women comprise the majority of the population with higher education, but only 11% of the members of parliament and ministers are women.² In line with equal access to education, girls' academic achievement is high. According to international comparisons, girls have a higher mathematics achievement than boys (Mullis et al., 2012).³ Armenia is thus a country where girls' mathematics performance equals to or exceeds that of boys', but where traditional gender roles also seem to be strong. These contrasting aspects of Armenian society make Armenia an interesting country to study.

Our study comprises a sample of 824 children and adolescents aged 7–16 years in Armenia (in school grades 2–10). We focus on three aspects of behavior: competitiveness, risk preferences and altruism. These preferences are arguably important for economic outcomes, since they have been linked to important educational choices as well as outcomes in both labor markets and financial markets (see e.g., Zhang, 2013; Buser et al., 2014; Bonin et al., 2007). In addition, these are three areas in which gender differences are often observed. Moreover, these preferences have been explored in a variety of countries and settings.

We study competitiveness as (1) the performance response to competitive settings, as in Gneezy et al. (2003), in four tasks: running, skipping rope, a math task and a verbal task, and as (2) the willingness to compete, as in Niederle and Vesterlund (2007), in a math task and a verbal task. These tasks are associated with gender stereotypes, as confirmed by a survey executed after the experiment. This allows us to test if observed gender differences are context dependent and hence malleable. We measure risk preferences using the choice list method where subjects choose between different certain amounts and a gamble. Finally, we study altruism by having participants play a dictator game where the recipient is a charity (a well-known orphanage in Yerevan).

We find that boys and girls are equally competitive when looking at how performance changes in skipping rope, the math task and the verbal task, whereas girls are more competitive than boys in running. When it comes to the choice to compete, we find, contrary to most previous studies from Western countries, no gender gap in the willingness to compete in neither the math task nor the verbal task. Similarly, and in contrast to most previous literature, we find no gender differences in confidence, measured as relative performance beliefs, in the math and verbal tasks. Looking also at whether the gender gap varies across age groups, we follow Andersen et al. (2013) and focus on comparing prepuberty children with children around puberty by dividing the sample into "older" children (grade 7 or above) and "younger" children (grade 6 and below). We find no statistically significant difference in the gender gap across age groups in any of the competitiveness tasks included in the study. In the risk task, while the gender gap is significant in the sample of older children and not significant in the sample of younger children, it is significantly higher among older children than among younger children. This is mainly due to an increase of boys' risk taking with age, while girls' risk taking is constant across the age groups. We also find that girls are significantly more altruistic than boys. This applies to both older and younger children.

Compared to previous literature on children and adolescents, our most salient result is the lack of gender differences in competitiveness in the math task. When it comes to willingness to compete in mathematical tasks, most previous studies find that boys are more competitive than girls (Almas et al., 2012; Booth and Nolen, 2012a; Cardenas et al., 2012; Dreber et al., 2014; Sutter and Glatzle-Rutzler, 2015). For competitiveness in other types of tasks, there are many null results (Cardenas et al., 2012; Dreber et al., 2011; Samak, 2013), and also some evidence of boys being more competitive (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2004; Cardenas et al., 2012; Sutter and Glatzle-Rutzler, 2015).⁴

Our results lend further support to the view that context or culture may be an important determinant of gender differences in competitiveness. There are by now a number of studies that look at willingness to compete in a math task in different developed and developing countries. Cardenas et al. (2012), in line with previous research among adults, find that boys in Sweden are more willing to compete than girls, but find no gender difference in Colombia (classified as a developing

¹ It is worth noting that son-preference, once suppressed, is reviving in Armenia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, sex ratios at birth in Armenia have increased drastically and now are comparable to those found in current-day China and India (see e.g. Michael et al., 2013).

² For information on gender equality and educational achievement see country profiles in Hausmann et al. (2013), and for the percentage of women in parliament see Armenia at <http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2013.A.htm>, last accessed on October 19, 2014.

³ TIMSS 2011 International Results in Mathematics show a small and insignificant advantage of Armenian girls in comparison to Armenian boys in the fourth grade, and a larger, and significant, advantage in the eighth grade.

⁴ This is also true for the majority of previous research on adults. In most cases (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2004; Grosse and Reiner, 2010; Gunther et al., 2009; Kamas and Preston, 2012; Shurchkov, 2012) but not all (Wozniak et al., 2014) the gender gap in competitiveness among adults diminishes when the task performed is word related compared to, for example, solving mazes or simple mathematical tasks.

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