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Gender and Well-Being around the World

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ABSTRACT

We explore gender differences in reported well-being around the world, both across and within countries – comparing age, income, and education cohorts. We find that women have higher levels of well-being than men, with a few exceptions in low income countries. We also find differences in the standard relationships between key variables – such as marriage and well-being - when differential gender rights are accounted for. We conclude that differences in well-being across genders are affected by the same empirical and methodological factors that drive the paradoxes underlying income and well-being debates, with norms and expectations playing an important mediating role.

KEY WORDS:

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a wide body of research aimed at better understanding differences across gender in welfare outcomes, and the implications of those differences – in particular the extent to which female outcomes are disadvantaged – for economic development. Women's rights have improved in general in the past few decades, but there are large differences across regions of the world and across countries within them. These differences, in turn, may have implications for the way in which these countries and regions develop.

We aim to contribute to this work by looking at differences in reported well-being across genders around the world. We examine differences across genders within countries, comparing age, income, education, and location (urban versus rural) cohorts, and explore how those same within-country differences vary across countries of different development levels.

The economics of happiness is a relatively new approach which uses surveys of reported well-being to establish the income and non-income determinants of human well-being, as well as to understand the effects of environmental and policy conditions. While happiness is the commonly used colloquial term, well-being is a more comprehensive term implying the many dimensions of human well-being, and is ultimately the subject of our inquiry.[1]

The factors affecting well-being that can be studied include environmental quality, inequality, commuting time, inflation and unemployment rates, trust in local and national institutions such as the judiciary, law enforcement, elections, media, and the quality of governance, among others. Presumably any or all of these could have quite different effects across genders.

The approach is particularly well-suited to addressing questions that standard revealed preferences approaches in the economics literature do not answer very well, such as situations where individual choice is limited, as is in the context of strong gender discrimination. Two sets of questions are the subject of the authors' ongoing research and are relevant here. The first is the welfare effects of macro and institutional arrangements that individuals are powerless to change. The second is the explanation of behaviors that are driven by norms (including low expectations), or by addiction and self-control problems. As such, the approach may be helpful in exploring differences in well-being across genders, both in the aggregate and in country or region-specific contexts where women's rights may be constrained or compromised.

Neither of the authors is an expert on gender issues. Our aim is to provide data on gender-specific well-being trends which is novel and hopefully useful to those who are. We build from our earlier work on well-being in general (1-4). Our research is based primarily on data from the Gallup World Poll (2005-2011) and measuring subjective well-being based on Cantril's ladder of life question. We also discuss our results in the context of the work of other authors based on different surveys.

One of the key themes that runs through our findings here, which is also a theme in our earlier work (1-4), is the extent to which, while well-being is, on average, higher in places with higher levels of per capita income and the associated benefits, the *changes* in the development process that are associated with achieving those higher levels are not necessarily associated with higher

levels of well-being, at least in the short-term. Indeed, those changes are often accompanied by significant public frustration and a resulting in loss of well-being. This theme also appears in some of the work of others that we review here on differences in gender well-being. While, on average, contexts which are more conducive to equal gender rights are typically associated with higher levels of well-being for women, the changes in norms and expectations that accompany changes in gender rights and roles can cause decreases in well-being, at least in the short term.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our analysis is based on the Gallup World Poll, an annual survey run by the Gallup Organization which has covered roughly 120 countries world-wide since 2005. The survey has nationally representative coverage in most countries, ranging from more than 4,000 household interviews in China every year to 500 households in Puerto Rico, and up to 6000 households in India in select years. The surveys are face to face in countries where telephone coverage is limited, and by telephone in those where it is universal (primarily the OECD countries). We also rely on the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) for macroeconomic data and country classifications, and on the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law Survey (WBLS)[2] for information on differences in the legal/regulatory framework across countries.

In addition to covering the usual socio-demographic indicators, the Gallup Poll has over one thousand questions, on topics ranging from reported well-being to attitudes about corruption, confidence in institutions, civic engagement, religiosity, and perceptions of economic performance – both at an individual level and at a national level.

Our primary focus of inquiry is subjective well-being and for that we rely on the Cantril ladder of life question in the Gallup World Poll. The question that captures the metric of self-reported individual well-being is phrased thus: "Imagine a ladder with steps numbered 0-10. Suppose 10 represents the best possible life for you, and 0 represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand…." Responses to this question correlate closely with the same variables that are captured by open-ended questions, such as "Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with your life?" although there are some differences. There are also questions in the survey about how people evaluate their life now compared to the past and how they expect their lives to be in the future, compared to their place on the ladder today.

One important difference between the ladder of life question and open-ended life satisfaction or happiness questions is that the former introduces a relative component. Thus responses to the ladder of life question typically correlate more closely with income levels, both across and within countries, than do the open ended questions, which in turn makes a difference to our results.

We regressed reported well-being – as assessed by the ladder of life question – on the usual demographic and socio-economic variables (age, age^2, gender, marital status, affect variables, household income and size, and urban versus rural location) with an ordered logit specification on the world-wide sample.

Our baseline models are:

$$LL_i = X_{1i}\beta_1 + X_{2i}\beta_2 + \varepsilon_i \text{ and}$$

$$LL\,future_i = X_{1i}\beta_1 + X_{2i}\beta_2 + \varepsilon_i$$

where:

X_1 is a person-specific vector of individual characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, personal affect of experienced joy and sadness in the previous day, satisfaction with freedom

X_2 is a person-specific vector of household socio-economic conditions such as annual household income (in country deciles), household location (ranging from rural to big city), and household size.

LL and *LLfuture* are both Cantril ladder of life questions. The first asks individual respondents to evaluate their life now (at present) compared to the best possible life (on a 0-10 scale ladder) and the second asks them to predict their position on the ladder five years in future. Zero denotes the worst possible life and ten denotes the best possible life on this 11-step scale.

In our comparisons across countries of different income levels, we used the World Bank World Development Indicators' classification for geographic region and country income level.[3] The geographic regions therein are: East Asia and the Pacific which includes Australia and New Zealand (EAP), Europe and Central Asia (ECA), Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), North America (NA), South Asia (SA), and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The country income classification categories are: Lower Income, Lower Middle and Upper Middle Income countries together as Middle Income, and High Income non-OECD and High Income countries together as High Income countries.

We included measures of affect in our regressions as controls for unobservable personality traits as, given that our data is a cross-section, we could not include person fixed effects. Our analysis is based on un-weighted averages for countries around the world, with the Gallup World Poll surveying approximately 1000 respondents per country per year. [Table 1]

3. RESULTS

Our main finding is that women have higher average levels of reported well-being than men world-wide. The standard deviation of well-being levels across women is also smaller than that of men. We find a consistent pattern across levels of development and over time.[4] Well-being levels are generally higher in countries with higher levels of development, and the well-being gap between men and women is also greater in countries with higher levels of development. [Tables 1 and 4, coefficients for *Gender*] When levels of well-being rise or fall (they fell from 2005-2010), they tend to co-move for both genders, with the gap between them remaining largely the same across the different sets of countries. [Figure 1 shows the trends of average well-being levels for women across different regions of the world.]

One notable exception, which is not surprising given the context, is Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where men have higher well-being levels than women for most of the years for which we have data. Not only is SSA the only region in the world where women have lower levels than men when evaluating their current conditions, but women there are also less positive about their future well-being than men, again departing from patterns in other regions. [Table 3, coefficients for *Gender* – regression columns 6 and 12]

Based on the regression models detailed above, we compared differences in male and female well-being within countries around the world more generally. In addition to the basic finding – that women report higher levels of well-being than men world-wide – we looked at differences across age and education cohorts, and also compared developed to developing countries.

We find that the gap between men and women's well-being is greater (with women having higher levels) in older (those aged 25 and over) than in younger cohorts. The gap is also greater in urban areas, and among educated (those who completed high school and beyond) rather than in less educated cohorts. Women's well-being levels seem to increase as they age, if they have more education, and if they live in urban areas, which is what one would expect from a gender rights perspective (one can imagine that gender rights are more equal in these cohorts). This is an important departure from the findings from other studies discussed in the next section.

We also found some related and interesting findings for marriage. While overall, married people have higher well-being levels than non-married people, a finding which is consistent throughout the literature, we find that young married people (in the ages below 25) have lower well-being levels than the average, while married people aged 25 and over are higher than the average. In our classification of married we included those in domestic partnerships living together without being technically married. Along the same lines, married people in urban areas report higher average well-being levels than the remaining people in urban areas, while married people in rural areas were no different than non-married people in rural areas. Our findings on marriage and education run in the same direction with the coefficient on marriage being much stronger for educated married people than for non-educated married people. All of these findings suggest that the effects (or correlation) of marriage on well-being are more likely to be positive in cohorts where gender rights are more equal.

(a) Differences across country income levels

An important question, of course, is how these trends vary across people in countries of different levels of development. The poorest people in many of the OECD countries are wealthier than the richest ones in some of the poorest countries in our sample. Presumably the relationship between gender and well-being could be quite different. In our full sample analysis, most of those at the top end of the income distribution are most likely in the wealthier countries in the sample.
To explore this further, we split our sample into low, middle, and high income countries using the World Development Indicators' classification of low income, low middle income, high middle income, high income OECD countries, and high income non-OECD countries, based on average per capita income levels for each country. We combined the two middle income categories and the two high income categories, resulting in our three income categories.

While the findings are, for the most part, in concurrence with those for the world-wide sample, there are some important departures. The most important of these is that neither our standard age

finding (the U-shaped convex curve) nor our gender finding hold for countries in the low-income group. In other words, there is no significant difference between men's and women's well-being in the low income group of countries. This is intuitive, as one can imagine that women are less likely to be equal in poorer countries, and that likely plays out in dampening their well-being levels.

There may also be important regional differences across the low-income countries. Our initial look at the world-wide sample comparing regions, noted above, found that the one region where women did not have higher well-being levels than men was Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). We explored the extent to which our low-income group finding is driven by respondents in SSA, compared to those in other low and middle-income regions. We found that SSA indeed stands out in that the relationships between both gender and marriage depart for those for the world-wide sample (and most previous work that has been done on the correlates of well-being): men have higher well-being levels than women, and married respondents have lower well-being levels than the average. Rather surprisingly, marriage was also negatively correlated with well-being in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region. Of the low and middle income regions, marriage was only positively correlated with well-being in the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA) and Europe and Central Asia (ECA) regions. Thus it seems that the generally positive relationship between marriage and well-being is primarily driven by wealthier countries.

As in the case of our other findings, the state of gender rights may play a role in this, although we do not know for sure. As one test of this, we explored whether the negative well-being "effect" of marriage was driven by married women. In contrast to what we expected, the result is driven by married men! Married men report lower levels of well-being than do married women in all three income regions, although the gap between married men and married women is smallest in the low income countries. There is no statistically significant gap between unmarried men and unmarried women in the low income countries, meanwhile, while the gender difference still holds for unmarried men and women in the middle and high income countries, with unmarried women having higher levels of well-being.[5]

As an additional exploration of norms and expectations differing across countries and development levels, we looked at the effects of a variable which asks if respondents have freedom to choose what to do with their lives. We found it was positively correlated with well-being everywhere, but the correlation was strongest in the high income group of countries. This result complements some of our previous work, as well as some of the studies cited in the next section, all of which suggest that norms and expectations about rights, such as freedom and gender equity (and/or crime and corruption) mediate their positive (negative) effects on well-being.[6]

We also analyzed attitudes about the future. In addition to the ladder of life question on life at present, Gallup World Poll also asks respondents to score their anticipated position on the identically-scaled ladder of life five years hence. While closely linked to answers to the present ladder of life question, responses to this "anticipated" ladder of life question are slightly more speculative and capture innate optimism on the one hand, and attitudes about realistic future prospects on the others.

Our results on gender and future well-being essentially run in the same direction as those for present well-being, but are also interesting in their own right. The basic difference between women and men holds: women are more optimistic about their future lives than are men. [Table 2] When we split the sample by the income level of the countries that respondents live in, we find that – as in the case of the ladder of life in general – the gap between the genders is greatest in the high income countries and still positive in the middle income countries. However, men are more positive about their future than are women in the low income countries. And while married men have lower well-being levels than married women in the same set of countries, they are actually more optimistic about their future well-being than are married women. [Tables 2, 3] When we split the sample into "educated" and "non-educated" respondents (greater than high school education are deemed *educated*), we find that the well-being gap between women and men is higher for more educated women, running in the same direction as our country-income level findings. And, not-unrelated, the correlation between being married and attitudes about the future is positive for educated respondents but is actually negative for the non-educated group.

(b) Gender Rights Regimes

It is difficult to accurately measure the variance in gender rights that we suspect plays a role in many of our findings. However, there is detectable, cross-country variance in the legal and regulatory frameworks pertaining to women's rights. The World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law Survey (WBLS) lists the existing legal and regulatory frameworks pertaining to gender in a country. We focused on the two simplest questions in this database listing legal and constitutional provisions: (a) Can a married woman get a job or pursue a trade or profession in the same way as a man? (b) Can a married woman be "head of household" in the same way as a man? We incorporated this information in our baseline regression as a means to explore the extent to which regulatory frameworks that aim to support gender equality improve women's well-being (using first the entire sample, and then restricting it to women only).

We found that the presence of a legal and constitution provisions aimed at gender equality, and particularly of married women, was positive for the well-being of women in the low-income countries, but insignificant for the well-being of women in high income countries. [See Table 4] Having such legal "guarantees" in place reflects a public commitment to gender equality, a public commitment which may matter more in the low income countries, where there is much greater variance in gender rights and such commitments are less likely to be the norm. In the higher-income countries, where equal gender rights have been (for the most part) established for some time, there is likely much less variance in the legal and regulatory regimes pertaining to gender.

4. RESULTS IN PERSPECTIVE

Our study is the first comprehensive empirical evaluation of the links between well-being and gender using such a comprehensive global dataset. Yet our results resonate with the findings from some earlier more focused studies.

Our finding of higher levels of female well-being is supported by recent research on countries around the world by Veira-Lima based on the WVS (5). Yet the two sets of research have important differences. While Veira-Lima also finds that women have higher well-being levels men in general, she finds that the gap between men and women is larger in countries with lower levels of development and less favorable gender rights – as measured by the Cigranelli-Richards Human Rights data (CIRI) and by the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI). In contrast to the ladder of life question in the Gallup Poll, the WVS has an open-ended life satisfaction question (running from 0-10). We posit that the variance in the results depends largely on the differences between the questions and what they capture, as well as on unobservable differences across countries.

Our past research on question framing (3) finds that the ladder of life question correlates much more closely with income across countries than do more open-ended happiness and life satisfaction questions. In one exploration in Afghanistan, where we tested the ladder of life question against an open-ended happiness question and a question about frequency of smiling the previous day (designed to capture positive affect), we found that respondents in Afghanistan scored much higher than the world average on the open-ended happiness and affect questions, but much lower than the world average on the ladder of life question. The ladder of life question is framed in relative terms, and evokes a broader reference norm than do general life satisfaction or affect questions. Different questions seem to capture different components or dimensions of well-being which, in turn, correlate differently with income and other measures of development progress.

Richard Easterlin's original work on income and happiness world-wide uncovered a seeming paradox: while individuals were happier than poorer ones within countries, there was not a consistent relationship between income and happiness across countries *or* over time. (6) The Easterlin Paradox resulted in a number of subsequent studies and is the now subject of much debate among economists. Recent work on cross-country income and well-being by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers finds a much closer log-linear relationship between average per capita incomes and well-being than have earlier studies, and the authors challenge the existence of the paradox. (7)

While not entering into that debate here, our contribution has been to demonstrate the role of the particular questions used in explaining much of the debate. Easterlin's work used numerous data sets and open-ended life satisfaction and happiness questions, while Stevenson and Wolfers use the Gallup data and the ladder of life question. As Angus Deaton notes in a 2008 paper, the ladder of life question invokes a world-wide reference norm, and respondents in Togo know enough to know that life is likely better outside Togo, and those in Denmark likely know they live better than those in Togo, even though each set of respondents may respond quite differently when simply asked how happy they are with their lives in general. (8)

Our research certainly suggests that to be the case, and finds a major role for norms and expectations in moderating the manner in which respondents answer well-being surveys, which in turn affect the dimensions of well-being that respondents emphasize. Some new research on the United States by Kahneman and Deaton suggests that income matters more as respondents evaluate their lives as a whole than it does when they evaluate their daily experiences. (9)

Graham, based on research in Latin America with Lora, finds that individuals are more likely to emphasize the dimensions of well-being that they are capable of having, and thus wealthier respondents emphasize work and health and their lives as a whole when responding to well-being questions, while poorer respondents with less agency and capabilities emphasize family, friends, and daily living experiences. (2, 10)

That debate has implications for the different findings on gender. Our research using the Gallup World Poll is based on the best possible life/ladder of life question and our findings correlate more closely with cross-country income than do Veira-Lima's, which are based on the open-ended life satisfaction question in the WVS. Her findings track much less closely with per capita income levels – and indeed almost run in the opposite direction. The nature of gender rights and the opportunities available to women may affect the manner in which they answer well-being surveys, or at least the dimensions of well-being that they emphasize when doing so.
In addition, Veira-Lima's research finds a much stronger role for country outliers (with no clear pattern among them) in the gender gap story than does ours. For example, she finds that women were less happy than men in Singapore, Burkina-Faso, Norway, Israel, Portugal, South Korea, and Brazil, among others. Clearly there are unobservable differences across countries that seem to affect the well-being of men and women differently – or at least how they respond to surveys, and open-ended happiness questions seem to reflect those unobservable differences more than does the ladder of life question.

As a robustness check of Veira-Lima's findings, we ran our baseline regressions (from above) with the WVS data instead of the Gallup World Poll data, and with life satisfaction instead of the ladder of life as the dependent variable. As in our base-line regressions, we find that women's life satisfaction is higher than that of men's in general, but the findings across countries of different income categories have much less of a clear pattern with the WVS/life satisfaction specification than with the Cantril ladder question and Gallup Poll data, echoing Veira-Lima's results.[7]

Another set of findings on happiness and gender may help explain these differential findings. Stevenson and Wolfers provide evidence that women in the United States experienced a decline in absolute and relative levels of happiness in the 70's and 80's, based on the US General Social Survey (GSS). (11) They explain their findings, at least in part, by the raised expectations that accompanied the equalization in gender rights, as well as the double burden that new professional opportunities introduced into many women's lives.

Chris Herbst, in a later paper, based on different survey methods and a different question in the DDB Needham Lifestyle Survey (NLSS), finds that both men and women experienced a similar decline in life satisfaction from 1985 to 2000. (12) Herbst attributes the difference in his findings to the questions used (happiness in the GSS versus life satisfaction in the NLSS) and, more importantly, to different survey methods. The GSS is based on face to face interviews, which may elicit "expected" responses from some respondents, and are subject to time pressures and cognitive limitations. The NLSS is however based on a mail survey, which provides more anonymity and allows respondents more time to reflect. Responses to face-to-face surveys are more likely to provide extreme responses on questions using ordinal answer scales, for example.

More important, though, the NLSS data captures trends in the late 1980's and 1990's, while the GSS captures trends in the 1970's and 1980's. Gender rights equality was much more established in the latter years. Consequently, women in the work-force may have experienced less barriers to entry as well as less perceived stigma or identity issues pertaining to working and raising a family than those in the earlier decades. One can surely imagine that similar changes in gender rights may have different effects in different countries and regions, depending on where in the cycle particular countries are.

Another example is work by Rafael Lalive and Alois Stutzer, which looks at differences in women's wages and well-being levels across Swiss cantons. (13) In June 1981, the Swiss held a referendum on equal rights for women with an emphasis on equal pay for work of equal value. The majority of cantons – 17 – voted in favor of the referendum, while nine voted against it (remarkably). Indeed, as late as 2003, a survey conducted in Switzerland found that there was still support for gender specific differences in appropriate pay.

Using the Swiss Labor Force Survey (SLFS) – a rotating panel conducted annually since 1991 – Lalive and Stutzer examined gender differences in pay and in life satisfaction across cantons. Unsurprisingly, they found that the gender wage gap narrowed significantly in cantons that had voted in favor of the referendum. An unexpected result, however, is that working women in the more conservative communities that had voted against the referendum were significantly more satisfied with their lives than were men (based on an open-ended life satisfaction question), while there was no significant difference in life satisfaction between women and men in the communities where large numbers of voters supported the referendum (approval rate greater than 60%). At the same time, women in the more conservative communities were less likely to report discrimination than they were in the communities that had strongly approved the referendum. Lalive and Stutzer focus on the role of different pay norms across communities; changing and/or higher expectations in the more liberal Swiss cantons likely affected the life and job satisfaction of women, at least in the short term. The same factors could underlie the divergent results in the well-being of women across time in the United States.

Changing norms and expectations, meanwhile, play an important role in explaining the often negative relationship between change and well-being in general. An example is a trend that Eduardo Lora and I have called the "paradox of unhappy growth" in which, controlling for average per capital levels of GDP, respondents are less satisfied with many aspects of their lives in faster growing countries. (9) We explain our results, at least in part, by the difference between the effects of changes and levels of income on well-being. While higher levels of income – and all of the things that typically accompany them, such as political rights and public goods – are associated with higher levels of well-being over time, many of the changes that accompany rapid income growth, such as increased inequality and insecurity and changing rewards to different skill sets, are often associated with lower levels of well-being in the short term. One can imagine that the same sort of phenomenon could occur at times of change in gender rights and the role of women in the workforce.

Some newer experimental research, meanwhile, which explores respondents' choices and predicted subjective well-being under a variety of scenarios, such as more income versus more leisure time and sleep, a better education versus a better social life, and more money versus more

family time, finds that respondents are more likely to choose the money centered alternative under a hypothetical choice scenario, while at the same time predicting that the non-money centered alternative would likely lead to higher levels of future well-being (14). The same authors cite their earlier research, which asks respondents to rank being born in 1950 versus being born in 1990, as well as living in a world with or without expanded freedoms for women. In both instances, respondents rank living in the 1990 world and in the expanded freedoms world higher, while at the same time predicting that the world without all of these changes would make them "happier". While this is experimental work based on hypothetical choices and predictions of subjective well-being, the findings run in the same direction as all of the ones cited above. Changes and in particular changes in norms seem to be associated with lower levels of well-being, even among respondents who acknowledge that those changes are desirable in terms of objective living conditions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Women around the world have higher levels of well-being than men, regardless of which well-being question is used. Reported well-being has been falling around the world over the time of the Gallup survey (2006-2010), meanwhile, and trends have co-moved across genders. When using the Cantril ladder of life question in the Gallup Poll, we find that overall well-being levels are higher in the richer countries/regions, and the gap between men and women is highest in the rich countries and non-existent in the poorest group. In contrast, research based on an open-ended life satisfaction question in the World Values Survey finds a larger gap between men's and women's well-being in poorer countries and those with less equal gender rights.
Some of this may be explained by differences in norms and expectations across these countries, which in turn affect the dimensions of well-being that respondents emphasize. Open-ended life satisfaction or happiness questions seem to capture these differences better than does the ladder of life question, which introduces a relative component as respondents assess their well-being levels. The nature of gender rights, the opportunities available to women, and related expectations may influence how they answer both open-ended and more framed well-being questions.

When we look at trends across cohorts within countries, the gap between male and female well-being is greater (e.g. women having higher levels than men) in older and more educated cohorts, as well as in urban areas. In this instance, as in the case of the split sample results for rich versus poor countries, the findings suggest that the gap is greater where gender rights are more equal. Our findings on marriage run in a similar direction. While married people, on average, have higher well-being levels than non-married people, married people in the young cohorts (e.g. ages less than 25) have lower levels than the average, as do married respondents in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Married people in urban areas have higher than average well-being levels, meanwhile, while married people in rural areas are no different from married people. The well-being gap between women and men is slightly higher in educated than in non-educated cohorts. Finally, having a better legal/regulatory framework pertaining to gender rights is positively correlated with women's well-being in the low income countries, but insignificant in the wealthier ones. It is plausible that the existence of an explicit legal framework is more important as a guarantee in the poor countries, where there is more variance in gender rights.

Our findings on attitudes about expected future well-being correspond. Women are more optimistic about their future lives than men in the middle and high income countries, but less optimistic than men in the low income ones. The gap between women and men is greater among educated than non-educated respondents, and marriage is positively correlated with future well-being for the educated group but negatively correlated for the less educated group.

Research based in the United States and Switzerland helps shed light. In the US (based on research with open ended happiness and life satisfaction questions), women have higher levels of well-being than men in general, yet women's well-being declined in the 1970's and 1980's compared to men's. After that point the trends co-moved. Some of that difference may be explained by initial changes and then stabilization of gender rights, with women taking on professional roles becoming increasingly the norm in the latter period. In Switzerland, in the aftermath of a referendum on equal pay for equal work, which resulted in more equal pay in the cantons that voted in favor, the reported life satisfaction levels of working women was no different than that of working men. In contrast, the life satisfaction of working women in the cantons that did not experience change in gender rights was higher than that of men. Women were more likely to report discrimination in the labor market in the pro-reform cantons, suggesting an increase in awareness and expectations.

Our findings highlight a seeming paradox, in which the changes that are associated with improving gender rights can be associated with lower levels of well-being for women, while contexts which have longer standing and well-established equality in gender rights are associated with higher levels of well-being for women. As we find in the case of the development process in general, while higher levels of per-capita income and the associated benefits that seem to come with it, such as better public goods and democratic governance, are good for well-being, the changes that are necessary to achieve those goods – and the acquisition of agency more generally – can reduce well-being, at least in the short term.

This note is a first look into differences in well-being across genders around the world. We find consistent patterns across genders, with women typically having higher levels of well-being than do men in the world as a whole, with the exception of the poorest countries. Our research also suggests that cross-gender differences in well-being are affected by the same empirical and methodological factors that drive the debates and paradoxes underlying the income and well-being debates more generally, with the nature of the well-being question and norms and expectations playing an important mediating role. Our findings also suggest that the standard relationships between key variables – such as marriage – and well-being are mediated by the state of gender rights.

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END NOTES

[1] For a detailed discussion of the definition of the different terms underlying the broader concept of well-being, terms which include happiness, life satisfaction, best possible life, subjective well-being, and reported well-being, among others. (Reference 2, Chapter 1).

[2] World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law Survey: http://wbl.worldbank.org

[3] World Bank's World Development Indicators: http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-classifications/country-and-lending-groups

[4] The ladder of life question asks respondents to compare their life to the best possible life they can imagine, ranking themselves on a 0-10 eleven-scale ladder. (2)

[5] Regression results available from the authors.

[6] On a slightly different note, we found that urban respondents were happier than rural respondents for the sample as a whole. Yet when we split the sample, we find that the urban happiness gap is driven by the middle income countries, while being in an urban area is negatively correlated for happiness for respondents in the wealthiest group of countries. One can imagine that living in an urban area in a middle income (and/or poor) country is better than living in a rural one, not least as most public services are significantly better in urban areas in middle income countries, while being in an urban area in the wealthiest countries may not have the same premium.

[7] Regression results available from the authors.