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What Men Want

Globally, the wellbeing, rights and autonomy of women continue to be limited by cultural norms that assign power to men. Achieving gender equality fundamentally requires that men share power with women. Yet, we still know surprisingly little about what leads men to support such empowerment.

A new study, led by UC Santa Barbara anthropologists in collaboration with the Tanzanian National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR), provides fresh insights and suggestions for policy-makers aiming to shift gender norms worldwide. Their findings are published in the journal [Evolutionary Human Sciences](#).

“A naive assumption would be that men are only interested in defending the status quo of patriarchal regimes,” said lead author David Lawson, an associate professor of anthropology at UC Santa Barbara and director of the campus’s [Applied Evolutionary Anthropology Lab](#). “Our investigation reveals much diversity in men’s viewpoints, with a clear tendency for certain types of men to be more supportive of women’s empowerment than others. These men may be especially important in their communities in promoting positive social change among their peers.”

The research team, which included postdoctoral scholar Susan Schaffnit and graduate student Joseph Kilgallen, both of UCSB, and social scientists Mark Urassa and Yusufu Kumogola of the [NIMR in Mwanza](#), collected data from around 600 men in northern Tanzania. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with 20 different statements related to topics such as authority in decision-making, intimate partner violence, women’s employment, girls’ education

and parental preference for sons over daughters.

“Consistent with reduced resource competition and greater exposure to more egalitarian gender norms, more educated men and those who held high-status professions were the most likely to support women’s empowerment,” Lawson said. “We also find that men whose wife earned a wage income were more supportive of women, perhaps because they reap the economic benefits of a wage-earning wife or because their wife holds greater bargaining power within the marriage, enabling her to draw more support.”

In contrast, polygynous marriage (multiple wives per husband), marriage to a much younger woman, and high fertility were all weakly associated with or unrelated to men’s support for women’s empowerment.

“We had predicted that these factors would be associated with more conflicting attitudes, as they are usually considered to reflect the expression of men’s interests over women’s,” Lawson said. “High fertility, for example, can be costly to women, especially in settings where childbirth carries a non-trivial risk of maternal mortality. But these factors did not clearly influence men’s attitudes, suggesting we may need to rethink our understanding of these practices.”

Schaffnit noted that the data also revealed considerable diversity across the different aspects of women’s empowerment the researchers investigated. “For instance, most men supported male authority in decision-making, but were generally supportive of girls’ education and women working outside the home,” she said. “These findings are important, because they remind us that gender equality is multifaceted and each facet may be influenced by different drivers.”

The authors call for future research that more explicitly examines which aspects of women’s empowerment present a true conflict of interest between men and women. Some aspects, such as educating daughters, may be beneficial to both fathers and mothers and are therefore supported by most men. Prior research by the team has also revealed that girls’ educational attainment has recently started to match that of boys, perhaps because of emerging opportunities for women’s employment, the researchers noted.

The study also addresses the problem of social desirability bias in survey research — i.e., the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by the interviewer. Social scientists, the researchers said, are well

aware of the tendency for study participants to misrepresent themselves when asked about sensitive issues like gender norms. However, this issue is normally treated as a study limitation or inconvenience, rather than tackled directly. The team addressed this problem by asking men's wives to also speculate on their husbands' true beliefs.

"Comparing self- and wife-reported responses reveals a clear tendency for men to misrepresent themselves when interviewed directly, often reporting substantially greater support for women's empowerment compared to what is estimated by their wives," Lawson said. "Moreover, the men who self-reported the greatest level of support disagree the most with their wives — suggesting they are most likely to be exaggerating."

The findings indicate that policy-makers should be very skeptical of past studies of men's attitudes based on self-report data alone.

"This was particularly important because some factors, like a wife working outside the home, was associated only with men's support for women's empowerment when examining the data provided by men's wives," Lawson said. "This indicates that an overreliance on direct self-report data in past research may be limiting our understanding of the role of men in achieving gender equality."

The project marks the first publication for UCSB graduate student Joseph Kilgallen, who is taking this topic forward with his PhD research.

"Anthropology has great potential to guide our understanding of gender norms and conflict worldwide," Kilgallen said. "Building on this study, I hope to ultimately produce research which critically examines theories about the origins of gender inequality, and provides new tools to help dismantle patriarchal norms harmful to women."

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About UC Santa Barbara

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